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SPINETINGLERS

#7

SNOW DAY

M. T. COFFIN

AN AVON CAMELOT BOOK

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1

Is this the dream I wished for?

No secrets here, no sneaky surprises—Debi Greer knew this was a dream before it even started; before she closed her eyes the night before, even . . .

Like most big stories of our time, news of the end of the world sort of leaked out, first as rumor, then as nervously confirmed fact. Thirteen years old, Debi was sitting in algebra class wrestling with some variables when the door opened and Ms. Peters stuck in her head. A teacher of English from down the hall, she said to Mrs. Fitzgerald, Debi's algebra teacher, "The cat's in the cradle."

Mrs. Fitzgerald started crying.
Ms. Peters left with the door open.
That's it.

Pretty much, anyway. It didn't happen in a quick, panicked rush, but within a few minutes the halls were full of kids and teachers, some leaving, some hanging around for no particular reason, all talking.

Some, like Mrs. Fitzgerald, were red-faced, teary. There was no dismissal, but everyone in class was leaving. A few of the slower ones were even taking their books. Confused, Debi went up to her teacher's desk; this made Mrs. Fitzgerald look up.

"Debi . . . please . . . just go home."

"It's not even lunchtime."

"It doesn't matter anymore."

"What doesn't matter?"

Still crying, Mrs. Fitzgerald said, "Sandy Peters has a sister, her sister has a boyfriend who works for NASA, and he knows, and she found out and told her sister, and now we know it's for real, and the cat's in the cradle. The cat is coming. The sky is falling."

The sky was falling. The sky was really falling. Chicken Little had been right, and so were the astronomers and telescope jockeys who first

found the cat, first discovered that the asteroid Cheshire had slipped from its harmless orbit and was headed for Earth's place in the sky, the cradle that always kept Mother Earth safe from harm's way. Twenty-five miles across, the cat was screaming down toward earth at two hundred thousand miles per hour with all the force of a million or so H-bombs. . . .

"Nuhhhh-no!" Sitting up quickly in bed—this was just a dream, after all, an enforced dream (enforced dream? What was that supposed to mean?)—Debi heard that weird question ringing in her ears, like some sort of echo.

Is this the dream you wished for? Is this the dream you wished for?

A nightmare? Would anybody wish for a nightmare?

Absolutely, positively, no way. . . .

2

So Debi got up for school.

Except it was the Thursday morning before the last Friday ahead of Christmas break, and Debi paced around her living room praying for a snow day.

Snow day: when the Pennsylvania winter flakes stacked high, covering the fields, yards, and roads so badly that the authorities had no choice but to close the schools. *Yes!* "Hey," Debi said out loud as she paced into the kitchen. "Sometimes, if the snow is really bad, they keep the schools closed two days in a row."

"Don't count on it, Sissy," said her father. "You best make sure you're ready before the bus comes."

"You're no fun," Debi said, but it really wasn't a matter of fun; it was the rules. Dad was a total play-by-the-rules guy, but Debi was a thinker. Quick math calculation: Close the schools two days, and by then they would be on the two-week Christmas break. And that was the only math calculation Debi wanted to make for a while; math was one of the reasons she needed a snow day so badly.

Math tests, to be precise. Mrs. Fitzgerald's brain-killer math tests, to be even more precise. Debi wasn't exactly a math wizard, and this test was probably going to be an all-time disaster.

Why did she have to worry about this stuff? She wasn't a math person; Debi fancied herself a poet, or at least she liked to write poems in her notebook. She'd already written one that morning, something that came to her between sleep and the shower:

Carlos Val the dread vampire
drove a hearse he had to hire.
In the back he kept his box,
tattered capes and dirty socks.
He parked back in an alleyway,
hiding from the sun each day,
until he made one big mistake
and did not set the parking brake.

Not bad for a snowy morning poem, she thought.

Debi pushed back her red hair, out of her eyes; time to curl again, because it was starting to fall straight. Wonderful, another bad hair day. Great. Bad hair and a math test. Debi had been checking the radio desperately since 6:30 A.M., but still no news.

"Got your books together?" asked Dad.

"Yes, and my lunch."

Dad appeared inside, stamping his feet. "What about your boots?"

Rolling her eyes, Debi said, "I don't need boots."

"You go outside in all this snow with just sneakers?"

"And thick socks. Those boots you bought me look goofy."

"They're not supposed to be a fashion statement. They keep your feet warm and dry."

"I'll be warm and dry enough. There is a bus, you know. It's not like I'm crossing the north pole on a dogsled."

"Best to be prepared."

"We're not in the army anymore, Daddy."

"*You* were never in the army, Sissy."

"Sometimes it sure seemed like it."

It definitely had. Before her father finally re-

tired the previous year, the family lived on an army post outside of Philadelphia; nothing but rules, rules, and other rules covering the first rules. They moved to Wilke Forke, Pennsylvania, after that, with Debi expecting things to relax, and they had, some, but her father was always going to be army on the inside.

Oh, well. At least Debi had gotten away from that stuff early in life; her older sisters, Connie and Theresa—now eighteen and twenty, suffered every bit of the way.

Well . . . maybe suffered was strong, but still—who wanted to be around soldiers all the time? Anyway, they were both at college now. Which was good for them, but it just put Debi under that much more of her father's scrutiny; she couldn't wait until she got away to college. It had to be better than middle school, or even high school. After all, people in college never seemed to want snow days.

Debi cranked the radio a little bit louder. "Come on, come on," she said, but the announcer had no good information.

"Bad news for the kiddies," he was saying. *"But so far it seems things are on track and all the local schools will be open."*

Groaning, Debi twisted her fingers together

and twisted some more. Her father nodded. "Come on, Sissy. Up and go get 'em," he said.

Debi groaned again for good measure and grabbed her stuff.

The wheezing yellow school bus—WILKE FORKE MUNICIPAL SCHOOL DISTRICT read the faded black lettering—slowly sludged through the snow-covered road, leaving grungy black tracks in its wake. There weren't many passengers; apparently most of the parents around were letting their kids off the hook this morning.

Never Daddy, thought Debi. Couldn't do that, could we? That would be against the rules. Wonderful.

The bus driver's name was Milo—Mad Milo, the kids called him, because he was definitely a different sort of personality; he drove the bus as if he were running a carnival ride, as if he held the crank to the double Ferris wheel, all colored lights and music crashing through the night. Milo had blazing blue eyes and black hair, the bangs of which fell long across his forehead, getting in his eyes all the time. He pushed it away, saying, "We're fighting the elements this morning, all just to get you where you need to be."

"Terrific," Debi answered, climbing on board.

Milo never settled for a blah greeting. "Come on, smile, it's almost Christmas."

"I'll smile next Christmas. Maybe."

Pulling the lever, Milo the Mad One swung the bus door closed, shifting gears to start again, as Debi walked down the rocking center aisle, anxious to sit down.

Lots of empty seats, she could drop down anywhere she wanted today—and didn't really care—but she wanted to be far away from Larry Taylor, the loud and obnoxious eighth grader. Tall, with shaggy blond hair and green eyes which caught the light in funny ways, Larry wore a thick U.S. Air Force–issue parka and seemed to spend much of his bus-riding time doing his best to torment the girls, especially Debi.

Not like Carl Lee; he was a nice guy, giving her a wave, and she waved back, starting to say something, but Carl wasn't looking at her anymore. Shy as always, he stared out the window.

Meanwhile, Andrea Fritch—The Fritch, everyone called her—was thumbing through her language books as always. German, French, Spanish, Russian; The Fritch had a collection of those tourist translation phrase books and claimed to be determined to learn them all before she even got into high school.

Seeing that Larry was already standing, no

doubt to follow and bother her the rest of the ride, Debi took refuge beside Cynthia Brooks, dropping down and saying, "Hi."

"Hi, back," said Cynthia. She looked up from the paperback she was reading. "Can you believe we have to go to school today?"

"Our bad luck. Maybe they'll let us out early."

"Yeah, right."

"Any new poems today?"

"Yeah. And a weird dream." Debi opened up her notebook to the vampire poem to show her.

"What kind of weird dream?"

"An enforced dream. Have you ever heard of that?"

"No. Is that like a nightmare or something?"

"Look alive, folks," said Larry. "Coming up on the wimp-stop next."

"Larry . . ."

"He's so mean," said Cynthia, looking up from the poem.

"He's definitely a jerk," agreed Debi.

Larry was making his usual cruel spiel because nerdy Thomas Tanner was at the next stop, waiting with his book bag. His mother stood alongside him, as if she were afraid he might be covered by the falling snow and left there as a snowman. Snow nerd, Debi thought, but then she felt bad.

There were six students now on the empty-

sounding bus as they turned down County Line Road, looking to pick up the last of the rural-route kids before heading on to the middle school. Mad Milo had the radio playing up front with him; usually the bus was so noisy nobody could listen, but today they could hear the music.

That's when it came, between songs, when the DJ chirped in, saying, *"Hey, this one will work—news for all you teachers and students out there, fresh off the presses from the township honchos—all Wilke Forke–area schools are closed today!"*

"Yes!" yelled Debi, jumping to her feet. "Yeah!"

She wasn't the only one; everyone was yelling and clapping, even Thomas Tanner.

Mad Milo just laughed, turning back to his passengers. "Well, okay and surprise to us all then," he said. "What do you guys say we get this beast turned around? There ain't going to be no school today!"

3

Only a problem: Cyndi was captain of the deep.

Or thought she might be, because Cyndi was in the middle of a dream. Except it was more than a dream. It was the most vivid, realistic dream she had ever had in her life, and at first it had been fun. Now it was getting scary, but it was still a fun kind of scary.

Because Cyndi was captain of an American submarine, just like the one in the paperback she had been reading on the bus. The USS *Tigerfish,* cruising beneath the Atlantic Ocean in the middle of World War II, and the sweat-stained faces of the men in her control room were all tense and

anxious, because she needed to make decisions upon which their lives depended.

"Skipper," growled her first officer, a man she instantly knew was named Walker—Commander Walker. The same guy from the book! He was at the periscope and backed away, saying, "Take a look, sir."

Cyndi did. Squinting her eyes and looking through the periscope, she saw waves bouncing up and down just below the viewer and—ahead a mile or so on the surface—a ship. An enemy destroyer!

"We can take her easily, sir," suggested Commander Walker. "Ease closer in at quarter speed and lay three torpedoes into her stern. That'll leave the whole convoy unprotected. We might not even need to sink any of the merchant ships—they'll surrender!"

Cyndi had to smile when she heard that talk; she loved old war movies. Submarines, destroyers, heroes, and villains. Now she was one of the heroes, except if she made the wrong decision, they could get sunk and killed. And it would be her fault.

Then Cyndi frowned, but it was really still a smile on the inside. It was a frown of decision. "Take us in, Mr. Walker."

"Aye aye, sir," said the commander, smiling

back at his captain and barking orders. "One quarter flank, load tubes two, three, and four. Stand by for battle stations."

"Aye aye, sir!" answered the men in the control room.

"Make your depth one hundred feet."

"Aye, sir, one hundred feet."

Cyndi couldn't help but grin, looking around and touching things with her hands. This was her sub! She was the captain and this was all real. The pipes running along the wall had a light layer of water, condensation from the humidity, the breathing of the men, and it was really cold and wet to the touch.

This was all real. She was captain of a submarine. How was this possible? It was so cool! They were going to sink an enemy destroyer. Except . . .

Except another sailor was stepping into the control room, irritated, reaching for Captain Cyndi's arm, and it wasn't really a sailor. It was Debi, Debi Greer, and she looked so angry and serious despite her red hair and braces. "Come on."

"What?"

"Come on, we're getting out of here."

"Out of here? What are you doing, Debi?" Cyndi didn't understand, and none of the sailors in the

control room were paying any attention to Debi as she pulled and tugged on their captain's arm.

"This is one of those enforced dreams, Cyndi," said Debi.

"I know that."

"Come on. This isn't safe."

"I'm having fun. What do you mean it isn't safe?"

"I know what's going on here now, Cyndi. I know who's doing it, and I know why, and we have to leave this place before it's too late!"

Too late? What was that supposed to mean?

"Cyndi, come on!"

So Cyndi gave up on her dream of commanding a wartime submarine and followed Debi through the hatch, wondering if she should pull it closed behind her. No point in that, though, because they weren't even on the submarine anymore, nor were they where they were supposed to be. As a matter of fact, for just a quick moment, they were back on the school bus. . . .

4

And on that school bus

there was a problem.

Even out there on the country road with all the room in the world, Milo couldn't seem to get the bus turned around.

"Okay," said Mad Milo, grabbing at the gearshift and pushing, pulling, grinding with the gas pedal. "Come on, roll!"

They did, just a little, but Debi felt her heart jump a bit as the bus turned, pulling lengthwise across the road, blocking the traffic path. Shouldn't they have gone down a while further, found a parking lot or some other wide spot in which to turn around? This didn't seem the great-

est idea; they were lengthwise across the road now. If a semi-truck or something else came barreling along it would never be able to stop in time, not on this snowy, icy road. The driver probably wouldn't even see them in time; just a sudden blur of yellow and black and then . . . slam!

"Okay, come on," said Milo again.

He didn't give up, fighting with the gears and the gas, rocking the big vehicle as he tried to force it over, across, or just right through the drift of snow blocking their path.

"Never gonna make it," said Larry.

"Oh, great," said Cynthia. "We're gonna get stuck."

"We won't get stuck," said Debi, but she wasn't so sure. The bus was pushing, trying to surge forward in the thick snow but not having much luck. Mad Milo was huffing under his breath, as if he were trying to move the thing with his chest muscles. "Come on, come on," he muttered.

"Here we go!" yelled Thomas as they seemed to jump forward.

Except they went nowhere; the big, long bus shuddered once, then slipped, sliding some until its angle actually pitched; Debi felt herself tossed as the bus left the road, slamming into the ditch

off the side of the road, burying the axle and leaving the bus stalled.

"Uh, oh," said Milo. He let off the gas and took his hand from the gearshift; the motor's roar idled. "That's not good."

"What's not good?" asked Thomas Tanner, sounding more than a little bit nervous.

Milo looked through the clicking windshield wipers, then shook his head and turned to his passengers. "Doesn't look like we're going anywhere now."

"Why not?"

"Because we're stuck, doofus," answered Larry.

"Another winning moment for Mad Milo," joked Cynthia.

"I heard that crack," said Milo. He had already grabbed up his microphone and was trying to contact school-bus headquarters, it looked like. "Nine to base," he clicked and spoke. "This is number nine to base."

Nothing but static came back over the school-bus radio.

Milo tried a couple of times more, without success. Still no answer, and now he frowned. "That's weird. It was working before."

"Base to four," said the radio. "Gotcha base, go ahead," said another voice from the same box.

"It's still working," said Larry.

Milo tried again. "Nine to base, do you read?" There wasn't a reply; the bus people kept talking to other drivers, but not Milo, although he tried. Finally he shook his head. "No, we can hear them, but they can't hear us."

"How does that happen?"

"I don't know. I just drive the bus, I don't work on the radios."

"Well, good golly and terrific," said Larry, standing and looking around. "Can you believe this guy? Getting us stuck out here?"

"Give him a break, Larry," said Cynthia from her seat. "There is a blizzard going on out there."

"Yeah, I know. I should be home right now playing Lizard Warrior."

"Oh, are you a video-game dweeb? Figures."

"Saving the world from alien invaders," said Larry.

"Spare me," said Debi.

Cynthia scooted out into the aisle now, edging down a bit. "Hey, Milo. What are we going to do?"

"Not much to do," said Milo, both hands still on the big steering wheel. "I guess we wait until the radio starts to work or somebody comes along."

"That could take a while."

"No problem," said Milo. "We'll keep the engine running. We've got heat, we've got tunes."

"I've got lunch," said Debi.

"Me too," said Carl Lee.

Debi shot him a surprised look; it was the first time Carl Lee had spoken in a long while, but he didn't say anything else; not yet, anyway. He looked back down at his lap, then out the window.

"Hangman, anybody?" asked Milo across his shoulder.

Larry groaned and for once Debi almost agreed; Mad Milo did like to play hangman, the old word-guessing game where you called out letters and tried to guess what the word was before all the arms and legs could be drawn on a stick-man hanging from a paper gallows. They played it on the bus sometimes as Milo drove, with someone up front keeping tabs on the dangling man. Milo even had a singsong poem of his own about the silly little game: "Hangman, hangman, I know it seems absurd. A man may die, may really die if you fail to guess the word. . . ."

"Gosh golly, and are you kidding?" asked Larry, cutting off any attempt by Milo to get into that game as they waited. "Why don't you just worry about getting us out of here, okay?"

So they sat for a long while there in the bus, waiting for something to happen. What a waste of a day, Debi was thinking, but at least it was

a snow day; no math tests. Which got her thinking about all of the possibilities as she scooted closer to the fog-covered window, wiped a little of the cold fog away from the glass with her palm, and watched the thick flakes continue to fall.

Up front, Milo was still fooling around and Carl Lee had wandered the aisle to have his own look and quiet talk with the driver. "I hate this already," said Larry again, back where the others were.

"Give us a break," muttered the Fritch. Then she repeated the same thing in French, and it sounded like a line from a song; she smiled. Larry dropped back into his seat and sulked.

Good for The Fritch, Debi thought.

She let her eyes wander again to the snow and the haze outside the bus, the conversation and movement on the bus shifting almost to melody by her lack of attention. Maybe it was fifteen minutes, maybe thirty, certainly not an hour, when the serious boredom started to set in. Cabin fever, Debi thought, like Daddy told stories about. Old miners and trappers in the Colorado mountains who went crazy during long winters and went after their families with axes. All that snow and cold could cause a person to imagine, to dream, of things that aren't there, that never

happened. Except cabin fever took weeks, months to set in.

How long for bus fever? Debi wondered.

"Ah, look at that," said Cynthia, exploring her lunch box. "There's a cookie hiding in here trying to look nonchalant."

"Say what?" Debi didn't understand; her mind had barely been on the bus, much less attending to cookies, but now even The Fritch looked over her seat to see what Cynthia was talking about.

"Nonchalant," she was saying. "Not wanting to be noticed, because Mr. Cookie knows if I'm hungry I might notice him and eat him."

"Mr. Cookie?" asked The Fritch. "Monsieur Cookie is supposedly thinking about all of this?"

"Oui," said Cynthia, using the only French word she knew, pulling open the plastic wrap, and sticking the cookie into her mouth. "Oh, look, there's another poor cookie, trying to act as if he didn't notice what happened to the first cookie. Oops for both of them."

Debi laughed a little, then wiped some more fog from the window so she could look outside for a while. If anything, the weather was deteriorating even more, snow still coming down heavy. This could definitely turn into a double snow day, two days off, and that would kill that math test forever, or at least until after Christmas break.

And she could probably take a few days over the break to hit the books, get that stuff down, do better on that test than she ever would now.

Debi laid her head against the cool window glass and let the boring time pass. How long? Minutes? Hours? Sure. Weather, whenever, when it snows thing glows.

Thing glows? It had to be things glow to meter right and that didn't even make sense in modern poetry.

Elsewhere on the bus, and obviously against her better judgment, Andrea The Fritch was sharing her language books with Larry—who did nothing more than make fun of them or try to find dirty words to look up—and with all cookies now disposed of, Cynthia sat reading her book. Carl Lee looked as zapped as always and Thomas Tanner was asleep already; his head hung back and his mouth hung open, making him look goofier than Debi would have believed possible.

Definitely goofy, except sleeping didn't seem like such a terrible idea; her head was starting to ache a bit, her neck felt cramped, and probably that was from being stuck in the seat with nothing to do. A little nap to pass the cramped-on-a-snow-covered-school-bus time. Get a few z's and be ready to enjoy the rest of the snow day, once you made it home.

Yeah, a nap. That'll work, that'll be okay. Debi closed her eyes, started to drift off into hazy slumber; she definitely didn't feel very good. Best to sleep, and when she woke up they'd be on their way home. Time to take it easy. . . .

Except the next thing she knew a voice was screaming at her: "Debi! Debi! Wake up! Wake up or we're all going to die!"

5

And Loudmouth Larry was having dreams too.

Really cool dreams, and it didn't matter to Larry that his dreams involved living in a video game–turned movie–turned reality; they were so cool. Because when the first science-fiction pulp novels were written in the early 1900s, Jules Verne and H. G. Wells warned of terrifying invasions from outer space; but as the years passed, writers and scientists concluded that any creatures capable of navigating the stars would, by implication, be a mature, educated, peace-loving race.

They were wrong. H. G. Wells had it right.

The D'aggi'annigs—their name in English; the closest accurate human pronunciation was actually found in an Eskimo dialect—came in force and, at first, without mercy. Descended from the reptiles of their world, they destroyed anything and everything they thought might prove a threat to them.

What battle there was ended in just a few weeks. The dragons—a corruption of the aliens' name, but something of an accurate portrayal of their appearance—began inflicting their code of honor and behavior on the world.

They reworked both Earth's calendar and clock. No work was permitted until 11:00 A.M. or so—nearly high sun, so schools and businesses were forced to readjust. Just beginning to recover from the war, the world slowed its pace even more.

In an effort to ease mankind's understanding of its new circumstances, the D'aggi'annigs sought Earth's own history for aid in translating concepts which were seemingly untranslatable from an alien tongue into Earth languages. Comparing Earth's history with their own, they settled on the concepts and terminology of the ancient empire of Rome. Their army was called the D'aggi Legion, filled with centurions, captains, and garrisons.

The concept of an all-powerful, all-protective empire was one on which the D'aggi settled comfortably. As a young child, Larry was assured by his father that there were no real monsters to worry about, but he was wrong. From where the dragons came, why they were on Earth, they did not say. And, for the most part, people soon stopped asking. Life was quiet again, simple—simpler, it seemed, than it had ever been.

Some customs are universal, honored among all different cultures, races, even worlds. Birthdays are one of these.

Human children living in dragon households were not unusual; many warriors had taken in the orphans of human casualties, as befitted the most honored traditions of *D'aggi'annigs'vau.* When D'aggis slew others in honorable battle, they became responsible for the family of the dead, arranged for the resettlement of wives, adopted younger children. This was the way of the D'aggis—the cold pain of death which was always soothed by love. In this fashion enemies evolved into allies.

What was special about the House of Ba'taul was that the human boy Larry had not only taken the name of his adopted dragon family, but was considered by the leading male of the house—father not being an accurate enough

translation—to be the eldest son and leading heir.

And what was even more special about this was the fact that the House of Ba'taul ruled over all the Earth's occupational force. The dragon called Ba'taul was literally king of the world, and the child he most loved was human.

And today was his birthday.

"Children, come inside," called Colonel Taanah out of one of the back doors of Ba'taul's home, the first house. Taanah rang the three bells hanging above the frame. An elderly D'aggi—by human standards he might have seemed grandfatherly—Taanah had been wounded in the war, losing his left eye and some of his hearing. Now he supervised the D'aggi female and human servants charged with caring for the children of the first house. He spoke in a stern voice to end the foolishness: "Children, now."

"Presents. We have to go to the Blue Room." Andaaa was teasing now. "Something fancy going on. Probably for your birthday. Lot of presents."

"Nall-gan-seela," said Larry, speaking an occasional snippet of dragon language. "Couldn't be enough presents to make up for standing in front of all those *jagg-pappa.*"

"*Jagg-pappa.* And people."

* * *

In his middle age, Ba'taul was a strong, tall D'aggi with bright orange-yellow eyes thick with blood. He had wide, flaring nostrils, his skin the same brownish color and texture as a desert toad's. Ba'taul spoke now, in English, saying, "Weary as I am of the seemingly endless banter of witless companions, I have decided to revive an ancient tradition set aside—out of unfortunate necessity, I fear—by my father's father. I have chosen to reinstate the position of prince-chancellor, and designate my heir while I still live."

This was a surprise, even to Larry, although he didn't fully understand D'aggi traditions. He looked over to Andaaa, who also seemed bewildered. Ba'taul was still speaking, pacing the room as he did, challenging the eyes of everyone there, D'aggi and human. "This is the eleventh year we have been among humanity, the eleventh year of our togetherness. And, as we all know, it has always been planned to return the throne of Earth to a human in generations to come. Well, good fortune is with us, as we shall not have to wait so long for our union to be finalized, for our companionship to be true brotherhood. Not for much longer shall mankind have to sit at our feet, not by our side. Today they rise to sit by

our side. I have decided that my leading son, my human son—Larry, shall wear the serpent ring."

Ba'taul turned now to Larry. "Come to me, my son."

Colonel Taanah was there now, offering something to Ba'taul, who accepted it: the ring. Holding it high above his head for all to see, Ba'taul offered it next to Saan, the leading minister.

Saan was a fierce-looking D'aggi female with streaks of blue coloring her dark, dry, red skin. It was said that during the war she killed a thousand humans herself, with weapons and claws. But that was so long ago. She took Larry's left hand in her own and placed the ring on his third finger; three snakes, one silver, one gold, one blue, all intertwined. Saan hesitated, then knelt on one leg. "Accept me, prince-chancellor."

Larry didn't know what to do. He looked to Ba'taul, who nodded and gestured with his right hand. Larry touched Saan on the shoulder and said, "I accept you."

Saan rose, running her tongue along her lips, licking them. Her eyes looked right and then left; both eyelids squeezed shut a moment. Larry felt a little nervous.

One by one, several dragon males stepped forward, kneeling before Larry and asking for acceptance. Larry touched each on the shoulder and

accepted them. Except the last person to approach did not bow. The last person poked him in the stomach with her fingertip and said, "Hello? Larry? Loudmouth Larry? This isn't right. We need to leave now."

"Leave now? Come on, Debi." For of course it was Debi, breaking up the fun as usual, and Larry was just starting to get into the feel of the whole thing, this Lizard Warriors for real. "What's the big deal?"

"The big deal is we can't stay here. Do you know what they really plan to do with us?"

"The dragons?" Larry didn't understand the question. "Of course. They take over the world, and it's up to us to . . ."

"Not your silly aliens, I'm talking about Them."

Them. "Them? What Them are you talking about?"

"*The* Them," said Debi, and just like with Cyndi she had Larry by the arm, pulling him away from the court of admirers and the game in which he was just about to get started, because, as she said, "If we don't leave now, if we don't go home now, we'll never get to go home at all. . . ."

6

"Debi! Debi! Wake up!"

It was mad Milo, shaking and screaming, and not just at Debi. Moving quickly up and down the aisle, he was pushing and shoving everyone, grabbing shoulders, yelling, "Up! Get up! Come on!"

"What?" Debi felt so tired she could hardly move; it was as if weights were strapped to her eyelids, her legs, her arms.

"What are you, crazy?" asked Larry. He'd been sleeping as well, and slowly rose from the seat in front of Debi, but stumbled as he did. Debi couldn't even remember his being in that seat; how long had he been there?

"You switched off the motor. What about the heat?" complained Cynthia, not moving yet, not quite awake yet.

"This air is bad!" screamed Milo. "Everyone, come on! Up! Move! Think about it! The motor! Carbon monoxide!"

"Huh? What are you screeching about, Mad Milo?"

"Carbon-monoxide gas," he said.

"I don't smell any gas."

"You won't smell it—you can't. It's odorless, colorless, and it'll kill you if you let it."

"What?"

"I didn't realize at first. I'm so stupid," said Milo. "It almost killed us all. We have to get off this bus, into the fresh air. Come on!"

That's right, thought Debi, her heart jumping. Milo had the rear emergency exit open now, and they bundled off of the bus. The cold, fresh wind slapped Debi hard, and she sucked it in; only then did she realize exactly how bad the air on the bus had been. Cynthia was coughing and Milo was counting heads: "Six and me, that's it, right? Right?"

"Right," said Larry. "Sheesh . . ."

"Give him a break, Larry," said Cynthia.

"Yeah," echoed Andrea, The Fritch. "He's only trying to help."

"Some help," said Larry, stamping around in the cold, climbing up the ditch to stand on the edge of the road. The snow was coming down so fast and heavy even those few feet blurred him a bit. "Can you believe this?" he was saying. "It's not even ten in the morning? Where are all the cars? There should be cars. Gosh and good golly, there should be cars along here."

Debi turned and said to Larry, "There are no cars because everybody with brains is at home."

"Yeah," Larry agreed, shoving his hands deep into his parka pockets. "At home and warm and watching TV."

"Funny," agreed Cynthia. "We finally get a snow day and it's ruined."

"Ruined lousy," said Larry, turning. "So, Andrea, how do you say 'I'm cold' in Chinese?"

"I'm not studying Chinese."

"Well, when you get around to it, don't forget to let me know."

Throughout all of this, Carl Lee had been with Milo, inspecting the ditch and drift where the bus was stuck. They came back around now and had no magic answers; Milo just confirmed the fact that they weren't moving anywhere.

Frowning, Larry said, "Well, we've at least got to get our stuff."

"You can't do that," said Milo.

"Oh, come on, the bus isn't full of radioactive poison. I'm gonna go grab the books. If I fall over and die in there you have permission to leave me." Larry climbed back on, walked once down the aisle, and returned. He had three sets of books with him, including Debi's bag, which he handed over. "Yours, right?"

"Thanks," she said.

"Remember, I risked my life for that."

"Right."

Larry took another moment to harass poor Milo. "Hey, Milo. Hey, Mad One. In case you didn't notice, I'm not dead. Not yet, anyway."

"Anyway?" asked Debi.

"Well, this cold seems likely to get us before anything else. We are definitely crazy for standing out here."

"Maybe," said Debi, but she didn't even like agreeing with Larry Taylor about the obvious things. It tended to encourage him on everything else.

They stood out there a short while, shivering and waiting. Thomas Tanner kicked at the top of the rear tire; it was almost completely buried in the snow and sludge.

"What are you thinking of doing, buying it?" wondered Larry.

Thomas didn't answer; he shuffled a few feet away.

"Don't wander out and get lost in the snow now," Larry teased.

Debi felt her teeth start to chatter, and she pulled her coat tight around her, although tight was probably not the best description because cold air was still getting to her. Even in the road behind the bus the snow was up over her ankles, and Debi felt her socks getting wet; wonderful. Icy cold to come. Dad had been right about the boots; who could see them buried in the snow, anyway?

Meanwhile, Larry was making loud noises about Milo and how this was just yet another of a long list of goof-ups the bus driver was making. "He's always getting lost, isn't he? Sheesh, sometimes you'd swear he wakes up with a different brain every couple of months."

Debi considered all that unfair, although it was true that on occasion Milo would seem suddenly confused by the bus route and ask a lot of directions. And sometimes he was more mellow than others; maybe pressure did get to him.

Larry definitely thought so.

"I like a guy who goes into panic mode over nothing."

"I don't think it's nothing," said Andrea, The Fritch. "People die from that stuff all the time."

"They die from freezing to death all the time, too. We need to get back on the bus."

"What about the air?"

"Crack open the windows, leave the doors open, but crank the heat. Doesn't that sound reasonable?"

It did, except when they bundled back on the bus and began pulling down windows, Milo couldn't manage to get the engine restarted.

Errrrr . . . errrrr . . . errrrrr . . .

The motor wouldn't turn over.

"I don't like the sound of that," said Carl Lee.

Mad Milo was still struggling with the engine, except the sound of the engine trying to turn over and start was growing weaker and weaker. *Errr . . . errr . . . errr . . .*

"I think Mad Milo is about to tank it," said Larry, who then called, "Why don't you try the radio again?"

"The radio's not working at all now," answered Milo.

"Wonderful."

"Hey, could you give me a break?" asked Milo. He didn't sound mad, he sounded . . . well, almost sad. As if he might burst out crying over the whole situation. "This isn't my fault. I mean,

maybe it is my fault, but I didn't mean for this to happen. I mean, I'm sorry . . . I mean . . ."

"It's okay," said Andrea, The Fritch. She was sitting closest to Milo anyway. Debi wanted to speak up and say it was okay, too, but she didn't. Larry didn't say anything, either.

At least that was good. Debi felt sorry for Milo. Sometimes it seemed as if there were two Milos, one happy and one sad—or one trying to be happy and the other trying not to be sad. Today they had the sad one.

Well, no wonder.

It was definitely getting cold. Colder, really, since it was already more than a bit chilly on the ventilated bus. "I guess we can close up the windows and stuff," said Milo. "I mean, the engine's not working anyway. There can't be any carbon monoxide if the engine isn't even running."

"It's still going to get cold," said Carl Lee, and that seemed an obvious fact. "Even with the windows and doors closed, it's still going to get very cold."

"We're in a metal box with ice around it," said Larry. "That sounds an awful lot like a refrigerator to me."

"So what are we supposed to do?" asked Thomas Tanner.

"I say we get out of here and walk."

"Walk where?" wondered Cynthia.

"Somewhere. Anywhere. There's got to be a store or a house or a gas station somewhere pretty close." Larry got more into his plan the more he explained it. "We sure can't wait around here, waiting to become Popsicles."

Cyndi wasn't buying into the plan. "In case you've forgotten, there's a blizzard out there. See?" She tapped the fogged window glass.

"Nah, if we stay together we'll be all right. Besides, it looks like it's clearing up a little to me. Doesn't it look like it's clearing up to you guys?"

Debi wiped at the window and stared outside. It didn't look like it was clearing up at all to her.

Snow, snow, go away, stack up again some other day. . . .

Not exactly original, but sincere.

Carl Lee asked the big question: "What do you think, Milo?" Carl never called him Mad Milo.

Milo shrugged, saying, "I think if I was a better bus driver we wouldn't be stuck out here."

"Yeah."

"It's not anybody's fault out here," Debi said finally. "If they had canceled school before we all got dragged outside, we wouldn't be stuck here either. But we are."

"Okay." Milo nodded. "Everybody zip up your

jackets, and we'll try to make it somewhere to a telephone."

"Some place warm with a telephone."

Andrea, The Fritch, had the best line: "With our luck today, we'll probably wind up at school."

7

Thomas Tanner's not-so-original wild kingdom

Many people believe that if every child got his or her wish, then the world would be full of astronauts, football players, airline pilots, movie actors, firemen, ballerinas, and police officers; after all, no little kid ever went through his days hoping he'd grow up to be an accountant or insurance salesman.

Tommy Tanner might have been sort of an exception. For as long as he could remember, he wanted to be a veterinarian. He loved animals—puppies, cats, hamsters, fish. He enjoyed all the

nature shows on television and had stacks of animal books he bought with his allowance.

Except . . . maybe he could wind up being better than a vet, more than just a vet. An animal expert, an animal researcher. What are they called? Zoologists? Something like that. Tommy actually could envision himself tracking beasts out in the wilds of Africa, South America, or Australia.

Which is where he was now, of course, thanks to the weird dream in which he found himself: in the tall grasses of the Australian outback, standing in the open back of a zebra-painted jeep, watching a horizon line speckled with bouncing kangaroos. "This is so neat," he heard himself saying to his driver, a man called O'Toole. The air was hot and dry, and for a moment the excitement of the whole thing almost swept Tommy away so that he almost forgot about the snow, but his bearings settled a bit and he put his hands on the back of the driver's seat. "What are we here for?"

"Eh, mate?" asked his Australian driver. He considered the question and then answered. "Well, we got a bit of a poachin' problem out here, Doc. Seems some slimeballs of who-knows-what origin have it a mind to take after Skippy and his buddies."

"Skippy?"

"The 'roos, Doc, the 'roos." O'Toole shook his head in disgust. "These lads are pure scum. They don't even make money off of the pelts; they just like to shoot the silly things for fun."

Tommy felt his face slip into a frown. The decision was obvious. "We've got to stop them."

"Sure," said the driver. "Now that you're here that shouldn't be too much of a problem."

"Let's get closer. See what's what."

O'Toole nodded, fumbled with the clutch, and the land-roving vehicle lurched forward. As it did Tommy Tanner took in the moment and wondered just for a few seconds how he had gotten here, how his entire life had shifted from the nerd of the middle school, stranded in the snow, to being out here in the outback. As an adult. As a real, respected person.

Why? he wondered. Why was it happening?

Why was he wondering?

Best to roll with this all, best to enjoy it.

He rode along in the camouflaged jeep with his assistant, O'Toole, and as he did Tommy noticed there were a couple of high-powered rifles on a rack between the seats. "Not to worry about those," O'Toole said, barely taking his glance from the path on which they were driving. "Keep

those around just in case something goes off-kilter."

"How often does that happen?"

O'Toole looked Tommy right in the eye then. "Happens all the time, mate. Happens all the time."

Tommy nodded. "We can handle it."

"Eh," agreed O'Toole. "No worries."

So they crept closer toward the kangaroos, and as they did Tommy couldn't help but look about and notice how beautiful the country was. How real it all seemed, the sights, the smells.

Maybe it was real. That thought definitely occurred to him, and Tommy realized this was a major moment, because if he just relaxed and accepted all of this it would be the past, all those other memories which would become the dreams, and he would really be here in Australia fighting to save the wild kangaroos.

Which was exactly what he'd decided to do when the jeep stopped, and he would have done it, too, if not for yet another interruption.

"Hold it," said the voice.

And as always it was Debi, and she stepped in front of the jeep, between Tommy and his driver and the kangaroo poachers. "Get off of that jeep, Tommy. We need to leave this, Tommy. It isn't right."

Seeming very upset—he *was* suddenly upset—Thomas Tanner said, "But look at all this, Debi. We're in Australia! We're out here with animals. Kangaroos, and koala bears, and those big ugly birds. Emus! That's what they're called, emus! How can we just walk away from all of this?"

"Because it's not real, Tommy."

"It can be real, Debi."

"Does it feel real to you, Tommy?"

It did, and he said so. "The back of this driver's seat is leather. Feel this seat. It's a real seat, real leather. This is a real jeep. Those are real kangaroos!" Jumping down from the back of the jeep, Tommy stumbled a bit but came up with a fistful of grass. "Look at this! This is real grass. Smell it, throw it around if you want to. Debi, come on, how can you say this isn't real?"

"Look at your driver," Debi said to him. "He doesn't even see me."

"What?"

"It's a dream, Tommy. It's your dream, and the characters in your dream can't even see me."

Tommy Tanner paused at that, looking off toward O'Toole the driver, who seemingly paid no attention to their conversation. It was as if he were a video being held on pause, waiting for the story to resume. So Tommy walked over to Debi, and she reached for his arm.

"We need to leave this," she said, pulling on his arm. "We don't have a whole lot of time."

Tommy didn't understand. "A whole lot of time for what?"

"Scary things are afoot," Debi told him in all seriousness as they stood there in the outback of Australia. "The world might end if we're not careful. . . ."

8

So they walked through
the snowy snow
with nowhere to goey go.

Cold is one of those things you never think about unless you are cold, Debi decided, and she said so out loud. "I mean, when you're warm in June and stuff and lying around in the yard trying to get a tan or something, you never think about how cold it'll be in December."

"I'm so cold I'll never be warm again," said Cyndi.

"I'm so cold I think I'm starting to warm up again," said Larry.

"What?"

"Just kidding."

The wind whistled, whipping the snow up against their ears as they walked. "I've seen movies like this," Andrea, The Fritch was saying, "except in the movies people always have dogsleds."

"Nah," said Larry. "No self-respecting dog would come out on a day like this."

Throughout all of this, Milo the bus driver said nothing, but he did lead the way. I hope he knows where he's going, Debi thought. After all, he had been known to get lost before, and that was on perfectly clear and warm days. The Fritch was talking about dogsleds, but even a dog would have problems with this weather. There was almost no visibility as they struggled against the elements. "How far?" asked Cynthia, sounding exhausted already.

"I don't know," answered Debi. "I can't see anything. Can you see anything?

"Just snow. And falling snow. And more snow."

"I don't know if leaving the bus was such a good idea."

"You heard Milo. That engine gas wasn't so good for us."

"Yeah, well, we could have left the motor off. At least we'd be out of the wind and the snow."

"Yeah."

"And I bet that bus would be a lot easier to find than we will be, wandering around like this. We don't even know if we're on the road anymore. Do you feel like we're on the road?"

"All I feel is cold and wet."

"At least you've got boots on."

Cynthia looked down at Debi's feet. "So where are your boots?"

"I didn't wear them; I thought they looked goofy."

"I'd rather be warm."

"I'd rather be home."

"Me too."

As they walked, Larry seemed to be the only one who's teeth weren't chattering, or at least Debi hadn't caught him at it. "Funny thing about chattering teeth," Larry said.

"There's n-n-n-nothing f-f-f-funny about chattering teeth," said Andrea, The Fritch.

"Yeah, it's a little funny. Hypothermia, that's the scientific term for freezing to death. Well, the first symptom of hypothermia is when you start shivering. That's because you're dying, and your brain knows it, so your brain is trying to keep warm by making lots of your muscles shake around and get warm. It's your body trying not to die, because it knows it's about to."

Cyndi and Debi both groaned. "Larry, please . . ."

"But, listen, this is the best. When the shivering doesn't work, your brain starts to get more scared because it knows it's dying—I mean, dying is so close your brain is scared. So that's when your teeth start chattering. You guys are two steps along the road." And Larry grinned. A mean, cruel, no-teeth-chattering-over-here grin.

"You're a slime," said Debi. She managed to get it out without chattering and thought to herself when this was all over she and Cynthia needed to get together and fix Larry Taylor somehow, once and for all. After this some of the others might even want to help.

"A slime?" said Larry, shrugging. "Gosh golly and you might be right."

"Even slime can freeze."

"Not in this parka."

That was when Milo stopped walking, and everybody else stopped with him. "Oh, no," Milo was saying.

"What?" Carl Lee was closest, and just when he asked it Debi saw; they all saw. Mad Milo had walked them down the wrong road somehow, because they had walked right up on an automobile guardrail and a sign that read DEAD END.

"Dead end," said Carl Lee very quietly. "I hope that's not a sign . . ."

"It is a sign," said Debi. "It's a sign that says,

'Dead End.'" But then she realized what he meant, and she shivered again.

"Gotta go back," said Thomas Tanner.

"Back, back, where are we going back to?" asked Larry.

"We've got to do something, I'm freezing!" said Cyndi, and Debi and The Fritch had to agree with that statement. So they started back up the road, looking for the wind off they had missed, a part of the road that would actually lead somewhere.

Now they were starting to be in real danger, Debi thought.

"There," said a voice from up ahead. Debi looked and saw it was Larry talking; how had he gotten so far ahead? He was also pointing. "There's a house over there."

Debi saw it, coming visible in between white-outs of blowing snow. It was an old, decrepit, three-story home sitting just off of the road; the place looked familiar, though. Of course, Debi remembered, it was a house they had ridden by and joked about all year, but she had never really given it much thought.

"Come on," said Milo. Then: "Wait, have we got everybody? Six, right? Debi? Larry? Carl? Cyndi? Thomas? Fritch? Where's The Fritch?"

"With me," said Larry. "Almost with me, anyway; she keeps slowing down."

"I'm too cold to walk."

"Come on, guys," said Milo. "Not too much farther; we're just going to that house. There's got to be a phone there."

"Does anybody even live there?" wondered The Fritch; her voice was almost a whine, she was that cold and shaking.

"There's some lights on inside, that means somebody's home."

"Not necessarily," muttered Larry. "Think about it. Mad Milo's lights are all on but there's nobody home."

"Be nice," said Debi.

"I can't be nice, because I'm being ice," said Larry. He grinned from inside his hood. "See? I can be a poet, too."

How did he know about that? wondered Debi. Even in the blowing snow she felt herself blush. It warmed her, a little. Not enough to stop walking, though.

Not too much farther now, anyway.

"Wait a minute," said Larry, stopping by the mailbox and a fence post. At least it looked like a mailbox until they got right up on it, then they saw it was a wooden sign of some sort. "What's this say? 'Beware of Dog'?"

"In this weather it'd be better to say 'Beware of Penguin.' "

"Whoever heard of a watch-penguin?"

"How about a watch-polar bear?"

Rubbing snow from the sign, Larry squinted to read and said, "Oops."

"Oops what?" Debi read the sign for herself. It said:

Muhlzae Maze Manor
Museum and Eventages—CLOSED FOREVER!!!
NO VISITORS!
STAY AWAY! THIS MEANS YOU!

"Is it a dog thing?" asked Carl Lee and Milo, coming over.

"Not exactly."

"What's a manor?" asked Cyndi.

"It's like a mansion," answered Andrea, The Fritch.

"So what's a maze manor?" wondered Carl Lee.

Debi answered that one. "Probably some kind of a puzzle."

"I believe it," said Larry. "I'm puzzled already."

"What's an 'eventage?' "

"How the heck should I know?"

"So what do we do?" asked Cyndi. Her voice was a whine now as well, and Debi knew if she

stayed out much longer she would be whining herself.

"We've still got to go to the door," said Larry.

Milo agreed, "This is an emergency."

"I don't kn-kn-kn-know," chattered Thomas. "That s-s-s-sign doesn't look too friendly."

"It's probably just meant to keep away salespeople and stuff. Door-to-door salesmen." Debi said it but she wasn't sure she believed it herself.

"Come on," said Milo, leading them all to the door. "I'm knocking."

"When did M-M-M-Milo get so brave?" wondered The Fritch.

"Probably when he got so cold," Debi said. "I'm starting to feel pretty b-b-b-brave myself."

"Gosh g-g-g-golly and t-t-t-terrific . . ." said Larry. Even he was chattering. Which meant even he was dying now, Debi realized. . . .

So what about Muhlzae Maze Manor?

At the house in the midst of the snowstorm, nobody seemed to be home.

There was no doorbell, but they banged on the front door for a while and listened for a response. There wasn't one, but there were definitely lights on inside; they could see that much from the front of the house. "Maybe they're not home," said Larry, trying to knock himself, as if he wasn't impressed by the efforts of Milo and Carl Lee.

"Maybe they're upstairs sleeping," said Cyndi.

"Or deaf," thought Carl Lee out loud. Was that

a joke, Debi wondered, or did he seriously think someone deaf might live there? Then again, anything was possible.

"Maybe they just mean what the sign said," said Thomas Tanner. "Maybe we should go on."

"Go on where?" Larry snorted. "We're lucky we made it this far."

"Walking around in the snow was your idea, Larry."

"Yeah, don't r-r-r-remind me, and don't tell anybody else."

"We can't just stand out here."

"Try the door," said Milo finally.

"What?"

"See if it's locked."

"What are we going to do? Break in?"

"We're not breaking in anywhere. We're taking refuge—it's okay. Whoever owns this place, nobody would expect us to stand out here and freeze to death."

Carl tried the front door then: It wasn't locked. He didn't hesitate even for a second—he pushed open the door and went inside. Nobody waited; they all followed, even Milo.

They found themselves in an entryway—a sort of hall–waiting room by the front door which led in five different directions: into three hallways,

up a flight of carpeted stairs, and straight into what appeared to be a closet.

The floor they were dripping on was wood and without a mat. "Close the door," said Cynthia, and Debi found herself the one doing it; the bolt snapped shut so soundly she immediately wondered if they were locked inside.

I'll check it later, she thought; too cold now.

"Weird . . ." said Larry.

Getting warm was like waking up from a deep, scary sleep. I never thought I'd be warm again, thought Debi, and she wasn't alone.

"Man, I forgot what heat feels like," said Andrea, The Fritch.

"I gotta take these boots off, even just for a minute," Carl Lee said. "I think my feet are frozen solid."

Everybody else seemed to feel the same way, because off came the boots, shoes, and jackets, all set down in careful piles along with the book bags.

"Hello?" Milo was creeping slowly into the big house, calling out through the entryway. "Hello? Anyone home? Is there anybody here?"

"Nobody but us ghosts," answered Larry.

"Funny."

"There's lights on, Larry," said Cyndi. "I don't think ghosts use lights."

"They might if they were afraid of the dark."

"It's not dark outside."

"Maybe it was dark when the ghosts got up to go to work in the morning."

"Ghosts with jobs? Not too scary." Cyndi and Andrea both laughed, happy enough at being warm to put up with Larry's lame jokes it seemed.

Debi's attention was on something else, a big painting on the entryway wall. It was a strange, bizarre painting, very realistically done, like a photograph, except it was a photograph that couldn't possibly have been taken in the real world. The picture showed a staircase inside of a mansion—maybe even this mansion—except the staircase stretched up, high, beyond any height possible. There seemed to be ten thousand steps, and none of them was level; all of the steps seemed off-kilter, shifting at strange, unlikely angles. The construction of an obviously mad carpenter, those steps would have been impossible to climb, to descend them a certain plunge, except at the top of the stairs—miles away it seemed—there was something that did not fall. At first almost too distant and small to make out, a few moments concentration showed Debi that what she was seeing up there was a tiny black cat with red eyes.

The eyes were as alive as she had ever seen in real life.

Pinpoints of life in an oil-and-ink vision.

The painting was the kind of thing that could hypnotize a person.

Almost.

Almost because it was kind of hard to become hypnotized by anything when Larry Taylor was creeping up on you, saying, "Boo!"

"What? Hey . . ."

"Spooking yourself out with a painting, eh? Sort of freaky. Wouldn't want it in my living room, but I guess it goes with the rest of this place."

"Rest of the place? You've been wandering around in somebody else's house?" Shocked, Debi said, "You shouldn't be doing that."

"We shouldn't be here at all. We are, though, so why not look around?"

"Where's Milo?"

"Wandering around. Said he was trying to find somebody or a phone, but he's just wandering around. Ever been in a house like this?"

"No," said Debi, nervously backing against the closet door. She was remembering the warning sign outside, the one that seemed to say everything but COME IN AND YOU ARE HISTORY!

"Come on," Larry was encouraging. "This is more like a museum anyway." Cyndi and The Fritch seemed up to it. Carl Lee was checking

out the painting now, and Thomas still seemed too cold to think.

The thought of looking about was a little exciting, but still . . . it didn't seem right to Debi, prowling about in somebody else's house. Nevertheless, she followed Larry as they ventured down the hallway to the left and into what Debi's Grandma Greer from Alabama would have called "the sitting room."

The room had no windows. There was a fireplace, but nothing was burning there; pokers and brushes stood in a rack nearby. What furniture they could see was old. It was easy to tell the place wasn't abandoned. There was no dust, everything looked clean. A hanging lamp with a yellow bulb gave off a dull glow, and below it on an antique end table (beside the covered couch) was an old-style telephone, black, the sort with two pieces, the receiver you held up against your ear and a base you held and into which you spoke.

"I've seen these phones," said The Fritch. "My sister has one."

"No," said Cynthia, shaking her head. "You've seen the mock-up ones like they sell in the mall. That's one of those real old phones. See? It's not made out of plastic."

It wasn't. Debi lifted the receiver and raised it

to her ear. Nothing. "It's not plugged in," she said.

"Maybe it's plugged in but the phones are down," said Larry.

"It's not plugged in," Debi said again, refusing even to check the wire to the wall. What was the point? If it was broken, what was she supposed to do? Fix it?

Larry checked, though—probably more in hopes of winning an argument than anything else, and the evidence seemed to be on his side. "Wired straight to here. Did you click it?"

"What?"

"Click the handle. In the old movies they always click the handle of those old phones."

Debi handed it to him. "Click away."

Larry tried. No luck; he sat the telephone back down. "This would be a perfect place for a haunted house."

"I started to go the wrong way down that other hall," said Thomas. "I almost got lost."

"What's down that way?"

"It turns, and there's a bunch of doors."

"Locked?"

Thomas seemed surprised by the question. "I didn't try them."

The Fritch had passed right through the sitting room through the doorway on the other side, re-

turning now. "That's a big dining room, and a kitchen."

"Kitchen?" said Larry. "I could use a bite."

"Larry . . ."

They wound up following him. It was a much larger kitchen than any of them had in their homes, with a large refrigerator and a huge walk-in-type freezer, the door of which was huge and made of some sort of shiny steel. "Wow," teased Larry, threatening to pull open the door. "I wonder what they've got hidden in here?"

"Larry, come on. . . ."

"What if this was the house of some crazed serial killer?"

"You can't just root through a person's kitchen. We're going to get into trouble." Cyndi was talking, but Debi agreed.

"Where's Milo?" she asked.

"Upstairs, around, who cares?" asked Larry, still concentrating on the walk-in freezer. "What I care about is what's inside of here. Ah-ha!" Larry gave out a dramatic cry, clanking open the big freezer door. It weighed a lot, pulling open ever so slowly, as if it were on tracks, and they all saw what was inside at the same time.

Except before the information could compute from Debi's eyes to her brain for a reaction, something else happened. . . .

10

Then, as in a twinkling of the eye,

Debi found herself standing in a warm, spring breeze, peering down from the high rampart of a gray castle.

It took a second or two for Debi to get her bearings and not lose her balance or drop to her knees. Only an instant before she had been with the others, just about to look into the freezer and see what was inside, and now she was outside, atop a castle. The weather was different; it was an impossibly fantastic day. The fields extending toward the horizon were all green. The sky was blue, the sun warm—this was a beautiful place.

England.

Yes, Debi realized in an instant, walking along the castle rooftop, trailing her hands on the cool brick rampart. This was England. This was a castle—the castle she had often dreamed about when she was younger and reading fairy tales and stories of knights and maidens.

"This can't be real," she said out loud, and startled herself with her own voice. Dreams always seemed muffled; this didn't seem muffled, she didn't sound obscured to herself. The sound of birds from a distant wood caught her ears; she could smell grass and animals and someone cooking something she couldn't identify.

"M'lady. Please, a moment."

At the sound of the voice, Debi turned. A knight in chain mail but wearing no helmet approached. He was handsome, with a beard and smiling, the metal of his suit clanking ever so quietly as he strolled forward. When he drew closer to her, he knelt for a moment in respect, then arose. "I would speak with you a moment, by your leave."

"Go ahead," said Debi, still getting her bearings.

"You are queen of all you survey," said the knight, in a tone that indicated he was merely reminding her of what she already knew. "Yet in

your heart I sense a longing. It's been so long since you had a true adventure."

"Who are you?" asked Debi. "What is this?"

"Who am I? Lancelot, M'lady, your humble servant. This land is what we call England; the castle, Camelot. Below I've ordered our horses prepared, so that we might inspect your kingdom."

"This seems so real."

"Aye. It is real, M'lady."

Debi shook her head. "No. This isn't real. It's a dream, some sort of real dream and I'm not sure how it happened, but I was in a house."

"This is your house."

"We were all in a house. It was cold, the bus broke down, we walked through the snow aways—unless we didn't."

The knight calling himself Lancelot seemed confused. "Your pardon, M'lady?"

Debi was remembering something Larry had been babbling, about what it was like to freeze to death. "Maybe that's it. Maybe that's what happened. We didn't make it. Maybe we're freezing to death right now."

"I assure you, no . . ."

"Oh, no, what if that's it?" Breaking into a desperate run, Debi charged across the walkway of the castle high: running felt so real, it was real.

No! She was running and breathing heavily for air, but this couldn't be real; a person didn't suddenly get transported back to the days of King Arthur. Not unless you were stuck in a snowbank and freezing to death and this was just your mind starting to play with you as hypothermia set in. "I've got to wake up!" she yelled. "We've got to wake up!"

The knight called after her. "Whom shall I awaken, M'lady?"

Her heart was beating wildly in fear now, and things about her were changing, because she found a staircase leading down into the castle and started down it, except three dark knights brandishing swords were rising from below.

"Assassins!" bellowed Lancelot from behind. "Run, M'lady! 'Tis assassins come to kill you!"

Debi turned and ran back across the rooftop of the castle, but there was nowhere to go. The three murderous knights quickly swept Lancelot out of their way, and there was no one to defend Debi; she had no weapon. All she had was her sudden certainty that this was still just some crazy dream, and as she climbed atop the stone ledge, at least 150 feet from the earth below, she thought, maybe she was stuck in a snowbank, freezing to death, and maybe, just maybe, she could fly. . . .

* * *

Debi couldn't fly, but she was back in the kitchen with the others.

Thump!

Thomas Tanner fainted right there and then; Debi felt like joining him. Cyndi finally got out a quiet yelp, which brought Carl Lee running, yelling, "What? What is it?"

"I don't know," whispered The Fritch.

Neither did Larry, nor any of them. The freezer door was shut, bolted down as if it had never been opened in the first place. Had it? "What happened?" asked Debi.

"I . . . I was on an island somewhere," said Cyndi. "Off by myself, walking the beach, picking up seashells. It was so warm and nice and beautiful, and then you screamed, and then I was back here. It was so real."

"Oh, my . . ." whispered Andrea, The Fritch. "I was on a train, traveling in Europe. They were speaking French and Italian, and I spoke it perfectly, and the train was going to Paris . . ."

"And it was totally real," said Debi.

"Yes. Until you screamed."

They all looked at Carl Lee. "I was out in the sitting room," he said, seeming confused.

"But you weren't with us when Larry opened the freezer," Debi said. "What happened to you,

Larry? When you opened the freezer? What did you see?"

"You guys are crazy," Larry answered. "(A), I didn't see anything, and (B), I didn't open the freezer."

"You did."

"I didn't. And how could I? It's locked."

"What?" Debi stared more closely at the freezer, and, indeed, there was a heavy padlock holding the bolt down. But there was also something else odd, something in the way Larry spoke that said he was lying. He'd been somewhere, seen something, just like the others standing there.

"What's going on?" asked Carl Lee.

"I wish I knew," said Debi.

Cyndi was helping Thomas Tanner up off the floor, and he was babbling just like the rest of them. "Football," he said. "I was playing football."

"Yeah, right," said Larry.

"It was real. I was with the high-school varsity team. I was a starter! I was playing running back, and I made a touchdown, and my girlfriend was there." He blushed. "I mean, I had a girl . . I mean there was a girl, and I was . . ."

"Cabin fever," said Debi, remembering again the old story. She explained it to them, but Larry smirked and even Carl Lee seemed doubtful.

"It probably takes more than a few hours to go crazy."

"Depends if anything is helping," Debi said.

The snow was still coming down heavily, and with the early winter sunsets it was easy to see that it was going to be dark before too much longer.

"I wonder if anyone is worried about us yet," said Cyndi.

"Absolutely," said Carl Lee. "There's a school bus missing after all."

"Oh, yeah," said Larry with his usual sarcasm. "I'm sure the FBI and CIA have all been alerted. Maybe even the army, marines, and a crack team from the Department of Agriculture."

Her heart still pounding from the instant dream—enforced dream. . . . Where was that term coming from? Where had she heard that before?—Debi asked, "Do you think the person who lives here will be back soon?"

Carl Lee shrugged but Larry shook his head. "Look at that weather. If they're at work or something they're not going to make it back here tonight.

Debi stared at the freezer door another moment, feeling somehow drawn to it. That thing had been open; before the England sword-fighting knights dream she had watched Larry pull it

open and . . . and . . . and what? What was it they had seen inside?

Nothing. She couldn't remember. The freezer was locked, and Larry himself was swearing he'd never had it open.

Debi had a thought and she said it out loud. "Funny," she said, "but it doesn't seem as big from inside, does it?"

"What are you talking about? It's a big house."

"Yeah, but not as big as it looks from the outside."

"We haven't been upstairs yet."

"What do you mean, 'yet'?"

Larry just smiled.

Andrea, The Fritch shook her head. "You do what you want, Larry, but I'm not going to creep around this place where it's none of my business anyway."

"Especially after suddenly being on that train?" asked Debi.

The Fritch shrugged. "That was nice. Maybe if I took a nap I'd have that dream again."

"Maybe that's the idea."

"I don't know," said Cyndi. "If I had a choice of dreams, I'd rather do something more exciting than walk on a beach. I mean, that's nice and all that, but there's no excitement in it. So what happened to you?"

"I'm going back to our stuff, I need to study my Spanish." Andrea left the room on her own, heading back.

The Fritch was right, Debi knew. They had come inside to keep from freezing to death, but that didn't give them the right to keep looking around. That made them burglars. The Fritch was going to read her language books, and Debi knew she should just go with her and study for the math test. Snow days or not, weirdness or not, the test was going to come along sooner or later. And then what?

Or . . .

Or she could write a poem in her notebook.

Either way, it was worthy of a sigh, and Debi knew she couldn't study math in a strange house with all these people around, anyway. So they walked back toward the sitting room, with Larry cracking his stupid jokes, listening to Cyndi agreeing with some of them. "This place is like a cross between the motel from *Psycho* and a day-care center for *The Addams Family* children," she said.

They found Milo again when they reentered the sitting room; he was standing there trying the same telephone they had earlier with just as little success. "I guess the lines are down," he said.

"Well, gee, why didn't we think of that?" mocked Larry, dropping onto one of the sheet-covered chairs.

"You shouldn't do that," said Milo.

"Ah, come on, Mad One. We'll be here for a while. Better grab a comfortable seat before they're all taken."

"I wish there was a TV or something," said Cyndi, looking around to see if maybe one was among the covered furniture, but there wasn't.

"We could see how bad the weather is," Debi agreed. "Find out how long the storm is going to go on."

"Please be quiet," Milo said. He was pacing around, obviously trying to think. So was Debi. She went out to where their coats, shoes, and book bags were and retrieved her notebook and a pen, then came back and sat on the rug near where Carl Lee had settled down. What she thought about was a poem, which she worked on for a while as everybody sat around, waiting for something to happen.

It was getting late in the day, after four o'clock now at least. Debi could tell because she was getting hungry, and even if there were food here, she wasn't sure she'd want to try it. She definitely didn't want anything to do with that room with the freezer in it. She racked her brain an-

other moment, but either she was blocking it or Loudmouth Larry was right: There had been nothing to see.

"It's starting to get dark," Cyndi said, returning from the dining room, where she'd gone to check the window for the tenth time.

"Well," said Milo, looking very, very uncomfortable. "So it gets dark. No big deal. At least the electricity is still working."

That's when the lights went out.

II

There, as on a darkling plain.

"Nice one, Milo; you cursed us."

They stood around for a while as Larry got up and ranted a bit. "Now what are we going to do?"

"What's the matter, Larry? You're not afraid of the dark, are you?"

Larry didn't answer, and that made Debi's heart jump. Suddenly, she knew. He is afraid of the dark! He is! Knowing that might come in handy someday, she thought. As it was, all Larry said was, "We wouldn't be here if this clown knew how to drive."

Poor Milo, thought Debi. Poor Mad Milo, taking

all the abuse. When was he actually going to get mad? How long was he going to let Larry pick on him before he said something?

At least a little while longer, it seemed, because Milo just pouted and said, "Sorry."

"It's going to be definitely dark soon, then we're going to be in real trouble."

"We could look around," said Milo. "There are probably some candles around somewhere."

They went back to the kitchen, that seeming the logical place to look, but Debi hesitated and found herself hanging back with Carl Lee as Larry and the others started opening doors and cupboards. Milo searched the pantry, and Cyndi said once again that she wasn't going into the basement. Larry reminded her that nobody had ever asked her to.

"Larry seems irritable," said Carl Lee.

"You mean more irritable than usual?"

"Yeah."

"Maybe he *is* afraid of the dark. Wouldn't that be funny, considering the way he always acts?"

"Yeah," said Carl Lee. He shook his head as the others searched the kitchen, saying, "Boy, we're becoming regular burglars, aren't we?"

"We're not burglars."

Larry heard that and said, "I'm not going to wind up in jail thanks to a bonehead bus driver."

"Come on, Larry," Debi told him. "Why can't you give Milo a break? He's doing his best."

"If this is his best, I'd hate to see his worst."

"Well, I don't see you doing anything."

"Watch me."

"What are you going to do?"

"I don't know. There's still that blizzard outside. Maybe I'll burn this place down for a signal fire."

"Oh, yeah, that'll help."

"Just an idea."

Milo stepped back into the kitchen now, with a box—a shoe box—full of candles of various lengths. There were at least 150 candles in the box; bits of candles, actually. "There are more," Milo explained. "I saw a bunch more boxes on the shelf back there. All like this."

Thomas Tanner said, "The power must go out at this house a lot."

"Yeah," Debi heard herself agreeing.

"So how are we supposed to light them?" asked Larry, seeming half-relieved, but still half-annoyed. "Did you think about that?"

"The stove is gas," Milo said. "We'll light a couple off of the stove and then the rest off of those."

"How many are we going to need?"

"Depends upon how dark it gets."

"What? Dark is dark."

"That's not true," said Milo, suddenly staring deep into Larry's smart, wiseguy eyes. "In a strange house, far away from Mommy and Daddy, it can get a lot darker than it does at home."

Debi believed Milo's story about the dark—and the differences in the dark—and as she watched the afternoon light fade, it was as if they were slipping down a well, shadows falling with them as more and more candles were lit in the sitting room, more and more yellow replaced diffused light. Some great snow day this was working out to be.

Cyndi had been thinking as well, because she asked, "Isn't it going to get cold in here now? What with the electricity off?"

"It's an oil-heated house," said Milo.

"How would you know?" demanded Larry from his chair.

"I can hear the fuel furnace running. Can't you?"

Debi listened; she couldn't make out anything besides everybody's breathing, but Larry shrugged. "Maybe."

Cyndi crept up beside Debi now, whispering, "Do you think this place is haunted?"

Debi considered that. "No. I don't know. I don't believe in that stuff, but . . . I don't know."

"I really was on that beach. I felt the sand between my toes."

"I know. I believe you."

"What happened to you? Why did you scream?"

Debi shrugged, not knowing whether she would sound stupid for going into it. "It was a nightmare. I was in trouble."

"It's funny, isn't it?" said Cyndi. "You had a nightmare, but everybody else had really fun dreams. Everybody but Larry, I mean. I guess it didn't happen to him."

"Maybe it did, but he won't say so."

"Why wouldn't he?" wondered Cyndi. She had another theory. "Maybe the ghost that did it to us didn't like Larry."

"You think a ghost did it?"

"What else?"

"I don't know," said Debi. "Did Larry open the freezer?"

Cyndi paused a second before answering. "I think so. I thought so."

"Did you see what was inside?"

"No. I mean, I thought I did. Thought I was going to. But then I was on that island, and then you screamed and I was back in the blizzard house."

"Maybe we are stuck in that snowbank, freezing, and this is all a dream."

"If we are, it's too late to do anything," said Cyndi. "So whose house do you think this is?"

"I don't know. How should I know?"

"You're the sort of person who knows things."

"Yeah, right."

"Are you going to write a poem about this?"

Debi shrugged.

Larry had been listening to this last part, though back to being as rude as he always was. "Poetry. Sheesh, who cares about poetry?"

Debi didn't say anything, but Cyndi asked, "Why don't you mind your own business, Larry?"

Larry was laughing, of course, and that was enough. Debi decided to go out to the entryway and read foreign language books with The Fritch rather than sit around and let Larry bug her, but that was when she wondered how Andrea could be doing that in the dark. Had she taken some of the candles out there?

Debi didn't remember seeing her do that. As a matter of fact, now that she thought about it, she realized she hadn't seen The Fritch since . . . since they first left those dreams in the kitchen. And there was no candle glow coming from the entryway. If The Fritch was there, she was alone in the dark in that cold draft.

Carefully lifting one of the taller candles so that she wouldn't burn herself, Debi walked back to the entryway, where they had left Andrea, The Fritch, and their coats and gloves and shoes and. . . .

"Hey!" Debi started yelling. It wasn't a scream, not panic, just a yell for help, for everybody to come, and come now! "Hey! Hey! Hey!"

It wasn't just about Andrea. Along with The Fritch, all of their coats, shoes, and book bags were gone!

12

No reason to panic.

Milo, of course, did panic and reasonably so, Debi thought. After all, he was the responsible adult; he was the one who was really going to get into trouble if something happened to any of them. "What do you mean, gone?" Milo seemed to jolt as if from an electric shock, and he ran back to the sitting room, calling out, "Andrea! Andrea! Hello! Where are you?"

"I think she left," Debi said.

"Why would she leave? Where could she go?" Debi didn't understand the questions. All she knew was that her friend was in trouble and it could be bad trouble.

"Looks like she took all our coats and shoes with her," said Larry.

"Why would she do that?"

"How should I know?"

Carl Lee opened the front door and stared outside into the dusk. Drifting snow had covered their approaching tracks, and there was no fresh set of tracks. Cyndi said, "I didn't hear the door open."

"Were you listening for it?"

"Sure. If the people who own the house come home, we'd like to know about it, wouldn't we?"

"There are no tracks outside. I don't think she left the house," said Carl Lee, closing the door back up.

The entryway was ice cold again from the wind, and Larry said, "Somebody is playing games with us, and it's probably Andrea. You guys know The Fritch."

"She wouldn't do this."

"Sure she would."

"Larry . . ."

"Maybe The Fritch just wanted to look around the place," suggested Thomas Tanner. "You know, take a look, see what's what?"

"No way," said Debi, asserting herself. "Andrea didn't even want to be here. She didn't want to be in the kitchen even before the freezer thing.

She wouldn't go rooting through somebody else's stuff. She had her language books, and that's all she wanted to do. Read her books."

"Hey, I'm not stupid," said Larry. "The stuff has to be outside and gone, otherwise there would be water drips from wherever it was taken. It couldn't have been dry yet." With that Larry opened what looked like a closet door, except it wasn't; the door opened to a blank wall.

"What?"

Larry stepped over and opened another door, one that was either to a closet or a hallway, except it led nowhere either, just to a blank wall—as if the rest of the house were just pretend, not even there. "This isn't possible," said Larry, pushing a hand against the wall. "What is this? What kind of a house has doors with walls behind them?"

"A haunted house," said Cyndi.

"It's not a haunted house," said Milo. He was back now, pursing his lips and trying to come up with a really big decision, except Debi didn't think he had one inside of him. Finally something just burst out of him. "Everybody just needs to go back into the living room and settle down. You all should not rile yourselves."

"Rile ourselves?" said Larry. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"Please. I'm trying to take care of you all as best I can. It's my job."

"Your job? Your job was to drive the bus."

"I'm sure Andrea is all right. I'll go find her. The rest of you should just go back in the living room and relax. Settle down and maybe even take a nap."

Debi found herself looking at Carl Lee then, and he looked right back. Take a nap? What was Mad Milo talking about? Larry was railing into him about it, and Cyndi said, "I wish I had a camera," but her voice was trembling a bit, as if she weren't thinking straight or something.

"Why?" asked Debi, more than a little confused. Cyndi seemed more than nervous; her very casual comment scared Debi more than anything else. "What could you possibly want a picture of right now?"

"This. Us. The bunch of us stranded. I'm on the yearbook committee; this would be so funny for the yearbook."

"I don't think this is funny," said Thomas.

"Stop whining," groaned Larry, turning on him now. "What's the matter? Afraid you'll never see your mother again?"

"No."

"No? So, what? Don't you want to see your mother again?"

"Larry, give him a break," said Debi, expecting Thomas to just go into his shell until Larry got tired of teasing, except that this time Thomas did a funny thing. Maybe it was the dark, or being trapped in the strange house, but he stood right up to Larry, jabbing a finger at the bigger boy.

"You're a loudmouthed jerk," he said.

"Yeah?" Larry immediately shoved Thomas, and Thomas shoved right back. They scuffled—Cyndi yelped—and before Debi could even think about helping, they were actually fighting each other.

"Hey!" yelled Carl Lee, jumping between them. Larry looked as if he might just slug Carl as well, except Carl said, "You guys are going to break something. This isn't our house—Larry, it isn't your house."

"Yeah?"

"We shouldn't even be here."

"You're telling me?" Larry was so pumped up he wasn't making sense, except to point at the battered Thomas and say, "Okay, Mr. Football dreamer. You think you got it good? Well, I was fighting aliens for control of the world. I was the inside guy, the spy, the head of the human resistance!"

"Say what?"

"The freezer thing," said Debi, realizing that

the frustration and tension of the situation had caused Larry to come clean with what he had been hiding. "So you did see something."

"Yeah," said Larry. "And it was real all right. And it was cool, and you screamed and stopped it."

"So what's happening?"

"I don't know. But I want to find out."

"What did you see inside of the freezer?"

"I don't know. Something. Or maybe I don't even remember having the freezer door open. This is too weird, but I don't know if it was good or bad. You know?"

Debi did know. "So what about Andrea?"

"I don't know. We need to look around."

"Oh, no," said Cyndi. "That's the last thing we need to do. Haven't you guys ever watched any horror movies?"

"Cyndi is right," said Milo, stepping into the conversation again. "Everyone needs to settle down and let me look."

"Why would we let you look?" wondered Larry. "You're incompetent."

"Larry's right," said Carl Lee. "What are you talking about naps for when somebody could be lost, or hurt?" Milo cringed a bit and turned to leave the room. Since Debi was standing there,

holding a lit candle, Carl said, "You check at the top of the stairs and I'll try the basement."

"You don't even know if there is anything at the top of the stairs, and only an idiot would go down into a dark basement," said Cyndi.

"Andrea might have gone down there and got locked in."

"She didn't go into the basement. We all talked about it. She's like me, she didn't want anything to do with the basement."

"I still want to look."

And I need to check upstairs, thought Debi. Did she have the nerve? She looked at Larry and Carl Lee and decided she wasn't about to look as if she were afraid in front of them, especially Larry the Loudmouth. What was the big deal? The Fritch was probably just going through a closet or something, looking for a warm jacket. Nobody who owned a house this big would care if a cold, young girl borrowed a jacket, would he?

Except Debi didn't believe this was a normal house, not for a minute.

Nevertheless, she had to look. So, alone, she started up the dark . . .

13

Stairway to the other place.

"This isn't good," Debi said to herself, as she climbed the stairs. "I don't think this is at all good. Andrea!" she called. "Fritch, hey! Hello?"

There was no answer, but at least Debi had the voices coming from below to reassure her she wasn't alone in this place. She climbed, counting the steps as she did. Twenty, twenty-five, thirty . . . it was a steep climb on carpeted steps. She barely heard her footfalls over her own breathing, and she held the candle out before her, looking for the top of the thing, except . . .

Except it was just like the doors Larry had found: The stairs led nowhere.

What? What sort of stairs lead nowhere? But sure enough, this was the end, because where the top floor hallway or door should have been was nothing more than flat, red brick. This house was barely real; it was as if it had been half thought out, part of someone's imagination, or . . .

Or a dream? Was all of this a dream?

No cheats like that, Debi thought. Besides, it was too real. She reached out to touch when she heard a grinding *whmmmph* behind her, and she turned and her heart did a double thump.

No . . .

A double thump because what little light there had been rising from the bottom of the staircase was now gone—the whole exit at the bottom of the staircase was gone, gone as if a sliding door had blocked the stairs midway down, and that's exactly what had happened.

She was trapped on a staircase to nowhere.

"Andrea?" It was a stupid thing to say, but she blurted it out automatically, then started back down the steps to check what had blocked her path. Sure enough, it was another flat wall.

"Hey!" she shouted, pounding on the wall. *Bam! Bam-bam!* "Hey! I'm locked back here now! Hey, hello!"

The new wall felt thick, heavier than she had imagined it could be. Maybe they were hearing

her on the other side, and maybe they weren't. Was it impossible to hear?

"Who's doing this?" she yelled. "I know you can hear me. There's no point in trapping me like this if you don't want to hear me scream."

No answer. Just silence.

"Come on, at least tell me what you want."

Nothing.

"Ow!" she yelped suddenly. Hot candle wax had dripped onto her left hand, and she tilted the candle a bit, allowing the excess to drip onto the carpeted steps, but this wasn't a good thing because the candle was burning low now. How long it might have left she couldn't guess, but it didn't seem to be a whole lot of time.

Not to mention air, she thought, suddenly concerned. This stair blockage; how tight was it? Airtight, maybe? Was the burning candle going to use up all the oxygen? Was that the plan of whoever was doing this to her? Was that the plan—to suffocate her to death without even telling her why?

"Please," she heard herself saying aloud. Trembling, she sat down on the steps. "Please, whoever you are, we didn't mean to sneak around in your house. Our school bus broke down and it was really cold outside, and we were just looking for help so we started walking and . . ."

Debi shut up. Why bother talking? Nobody was listening anyway, and if they were listening, it probably wasn't going to wind up for the good, anyway.

Now what? Well, maybe, just maybe, this whole sliding wall thing wasn't as perfect as it was supposed to be. Maybe there was a way to feel around the edges of the thing and find a way to slide it back open enough to squeeze out. It wouldn't kill her to try before whoever it was tried to kill her, right?

Debi carefully put her candle down on a step and left it to burn there while she fumbled with the sliding wall at the base of the stairs. Except the light flickered out, and the extinguishing of the candle brought a split second of darkness and then, light.

Not England this time.

This time she was on a space shuttle: in the pilot's seat, strapped in beside another astronaut who was helping her go through the final pre-flight check.

The other astronaut, Debi was surprised to see, was Milo. Mad Milo. "Stand by for transfer to internal power," he said.

"Roger, Atlantis," answered back the NASA-control people in Debi's earphones. She looked at herself: blue NASA jumpsuit, space helmet, before

her a mass of blinking controls. And the voice in the helmet said, "T minus two minutes, twenty-two seconds and counting. All systems go."

Debi looked over. "Milo."

"Yeah?"

"What is this? What's going on?"

"What does it look like? We're about to go into orbit."

"No. This isn't real."

"It's as real as you want it to be. It can last as long as you want it to. It could last forever. Ever thought about forever?" Milo reached over in front of Debi to throw a few switches. "Gotta follow the flight plan and checklist," he said. "It's beside you, on the left."

Debi closed her eyes, squeezed them so tight that it made her head start to hurt, and then opened them again. She was still beside Milo on the space shuttle, and she figured something out in an instant. "You know about this stuff, don't you, Milo?"

"Of course I do. I'm just trying to help you, Debi. Just about a minute before blastoff now."

"No way," said Debi. She fumbled for a moment with the buckles strapping her into the seat, but she got out of them.

"Hey," Milo said, watching her start to climb out. "You can't do that. What are you doing?"

"Leaving," said Debi. "Andrea! Andrea!"

"Andrea's not on the shuttle, she's in Paris, France. She's happy. Debi, sit down. Hold on!"

Hold on? Why?

Of course. This alleged blastoff.

"Three . . . two . . . one . . . ignition!" crackled a voice, and Debi felt a huge surge of power and rumbling beneath her feet. The shuttle was starting to rise, the force of liftoff pushing down on her.

"I don't believe in this!" Deb was yelling, although it was hard to yell, because the power and G-forces of the launch were pushing down on her. The noise was incredible, hurting her ears. How could this be just a dream? Maybe it was real. Maybe, somehow, it was real, and she really was an astronaut, and all the rest of it—school, the snow day, the strange house—maybe that was the dream part. Maybe she was freezing and this was all part of that drifting toward death.

The rocket rumbled and rose, and Debi lost her grip, falling to the rear of the cabin with an incredible force and scream as the ship started to roll and turn on its rise into orbit. And Debi noticed, as she slammed into the wall and slipped unconscious, that getting knocked out that way was a lot like watching a candle flicker out on a dark staircase. . . .

14

Life is like a bad idea gone good.

Or so it could be. Was this the dream you wished for? Again that thought hit Debi, and this time she knew what it meant when she awoke from the enforced dream (she knew what that meant, as well). Somebody, or something, was trying to force her to start living in a dreamworld, and he or it was giving her choices.

Why?

When Debi awoke, she was flat on her back on a fabulous four-poster bed in a room asplash with burning candles celebrating the darkness. So, apparently, the creepy house was the real part. "At

least I'm not half dead in a snowdrift, dreaming. At least I don't think so."

She sat up not slowly but in a bolt, looking about, ready to strike at whoever was doing these things to her, but there was nobody. She was alone in a locked room, surrounded by no less than thirty burning candles.

How long had she been here? Minutes? Hours? She couldn't tell.

This was a bed she was on, but the room didn't seem to be just a bedroom. Debi arose and looked around. This was obviously some sort of library or study; there were several large bookcases, and she approached one of them, taking one of the candles to read some of the book titles.

WHATEVER DREAM YOU WANT read gold lettering on the binding of one of the books. Huh? She pulled out another and *COME ON DEBI, CONSIDER THE FUN* read the colorful cover. That was so scary she tossed it away.

In an instant, Debi understood just what was wrong about the makeup of this room. A normal bedroom had a dresser and a nightstand and other things accessible to the person who slept there; even she had a clock radio at home. This was more like a museum display than anything real someone might be sleeping in on a nightly basis.

"The space thing," Debi said out loud, to whomever was watching and listening to her. "This trick isn't even original. I saw that movie—I can't remember what it was called, but the astronaut gets dragged across the universe at the speed of light and when he wakes up he's stuck in a cheap hotel room. Is that what this is supposed to be?"

No answer.

Also in the room was an aquarium, large, at least five and a half feet across and three feet high; it rested on an iron stand against one of the walls, in the place where a dresser would normally be. Debi stared into the cloudy water; obviously nothing could live in water that looked so bad. There was an air filter–setup plugged into the aquarium, but with the power out nothing was running. Lifting one of the candles and holding it before her, Debi bent over to stare into the tank, trying to see if there was anything in there. . . .

Bam! She jumped and dropped the candle, which blew out, because something big leaped from the cloud and slammed itself into the glass, something so fast and scary it seemed the glass should have shattered and water sprayed forward along with it. But that didn't happen; instead, Debi just found herself with one fewer glow.

"There's something to all this," Debi said. There had to be. "Why am I here?" she asked out loud. Probably it was best to speak her thoughts out loud. Whoever was going to all the trouble to run this haunted house routine must have a purpose.

Unless he was crazy.

Obviously he was powerful, unless—and this was an even worse thought—unless the place really was haunted by some genuine spooks. . . .

Debi turned to look around the room, to figure her way out. The closet door was open, and something about it caught her eye. At first she didn't catch what she was seeing, but then she stepped into the closet, closer.

It was the clothes in the closet, something odd about them.

They were paired.

More than paired. Tripled. Quadrupled.

Four, five, no, six striped shirts, exactly alike, hung side by side, as did pairs of blue trousers, and black trousers, and gray shirts, and an identical set of Penn State shirts.

These were the weirdest of the weird, because the Penn State shirts had a tear on the left shoulder: a rip from wear, the way a shirt somebody played softball in might get torn. Except the

same casual rip was on the left shoulder of every shirt.

Debi pushed through the clothing, looking at the bottom of the closet. There were shoes there, a few different pairs, sneakers, dress shoes, boots. All in sets of two.

Silly. And scary.

Why? Debi wondered. Why did something so silly seem scary?

"What am I doing?" she asked out loud. "I'm prowling around somebody's bedroom. Is that what I'm supposed to be doing? Why am I supposed to be doing this? What are we trying to prove here?"

Debi wished she could remember a poem in that instant—just a flash, really. She turned to the door and expected to find what she did: another wall behind the door, blocking off the escape.

Debi spoke: "When my dad finds out what you did to me he's going to get you."

"Hey!" Debi banged her fist against this new wall. It felt and sounded solid and that was definitely not a good thing. "Hey!" she yelled. "Hey, anybody! I'm caught in here! I'm caught in here!"

Caught in where? What was this place?

Was she on the second or third floor of this house? Or in the basement, even? She realized

then that she didn't know. Now she was worried, and trapped, and no longer cared whose stuff she might be violating. "Let me out of here if you know what's good for you," she said to whomever might be listening as she ripped around the room. "My dad was an army guy, he's tough and he's mean and he's probably looking for me by now."

The room didn't respond to her threats, and she was in the closet now, pushing clothes around and looking for something, anything. In the closet was where she found it.

Behind the clothes, behind the shoes, the lower back wall of the closet was not just a wall; it was a door. A small door, like something that might hide extra storage space, except Debi had a feeling it wasn't just hiding room for more shoes, and she was right.

There was a latch, like a door handle. She had to drop to her knees to pull it open, and when she did all she saw was black, of course, until she pushed a candle forward and crawled in.

Not a storage room, not a cubbyhole, not even a crawl space. It was a hallway. Not a regular hallway, exactly, barely two feet wide, but she could stand up inside and follow it. What she found as she followed the corridor were other doors, and not just other doors—at eye level there

were peepholes. Obviously the house had been constructed to allow its owner to sneak around, peeking in on unsuspecting guests.

Definitely creepy.

But not as creepy as what she found at the end of the hall, when there were no more doors from which to choose, no more peepholes. The orange glow of the candle first showed the end of the hall approaching, then something brushed against the back of Debi's neck. She screamed, bouncing back against the wall, clenching her hands into fists, but she didn't actually drop the candle until she saw into what she'd bumped, swinging from the ceiling of this strange hallway.

A hangman's noose.

Debi fumbled for the candle before the flame could go out. The noose was empty, but it was part of a gallows, a wooden contraption constructed specifically from which to hang people.

But it was empty. Thank goodness. What sort of horror house was this?

Screaming just takes breath, though, and nobody was actually grabbing at her, so Debi stopped in mid-yelp to drop to the floor. Holding the candle, she figured she could get out to somewhere else—anywhere else—through one of those small doors along the way, if she could just find one. "Come on, come on," she said, huffing at her-

self, fighting for breath. Please let there be nobody or nothing in here with me, she thought, because Debi had little doubt that if there were anybody or anything in that black hall with her, and an icy finger should touch her neck, her heart would stop immediately and that would be it. . . .

15

As an alternative to reality.

When she crawled out of the closet into the dark bedroom, Debi didn't have to look around much for the next order of strangeness because she found an open book on the bed, the pages hand-written: a diary. Peculiar, she thought, because it appeared to be a long history of someone's life, except when she started to read at the top of the open page she saw:

which was a faithless way of reconsidering the things that happened that day. Hey, everybody else is happy in their dreamworlds, Miss Debi, why can't you be? Don't obsess

about what's in the freezer. It's a snow day; relax and enjoy it. You've got to calm yourself, don't upset the others. . . .

"No way," said Debi, bolting back. The book was talking to her.

Calm yourself. That's what Milo had said to them all in the sitting room; stay calm, don't upset the others. What was that supposed to mean? Of course she was upset! This diary was addressed to her like a letter. How? How could they have known she would crawl out into this room? Who could have known she would be here? Who could have even known it would be a snow day?

Knock-knock-knock.

Already rushing, her heart just about exploded from this sudden pounding on the door of this room. Actually the pounding had a rhythm, a mocking rhythm which she recognized, but . . . of course. *Shave and a haircut . . . two bits.*

Right out of a cartoon.

This was all right out of a cartoon.

Alerted, Debi went to the door and jerked it open, expecting to see a teasing wall behind it as with the others, only this one actually led out. Also in that instant the lights came back on.

Which meant the freezer would be running again. The locked freezer.

Debi stepped out of the now-open door and into the now-illuminated hallway. There he was! Milo! Milo from the dream and Milo from the bus. "Milo! Wait! What's going on?"

He didn't wait, and for a second Debi didn't move. Milo was going left down the hall, but then she heard a noise behind her and turned to see Milo going in the opposite direction.

This was crazy, but she went to the top of the stairs and looked down, and there was a light coming from below. The stairway was clear—if she dared risk being trapped again.

"I won't be trapped," Debi said aloud. "If I was going to be trapped, why bother letting me out in the first place?" So she started down the stairs and got to the entryway in time to see Milo—how was he getting around like this?—dashing deep into the house. But as she passed through the entryway, something caught her eye.

The picture. The oil painting on the wall of the twisting, winding staircase with the cat sitting silently atop in the distance. It caught her eye because something had changed.

The cat had moved.

He now sat, full frame, barely inches into the

foreground, his eyes red and piercing, something very intense behind them.

"No!" Debi turned away, refusing to accept this. It's a fun house, she realized then. A carnival fun house where the mirrors twist things, making you fat in one mirror, skinny in another, wide and thin, tall and short. This was like *Alice in Wonderland*—no, different than that. It was like an amusement-park ride. This whole adventure was like a ride, with the music playing above, and the old folkster telling the story.

"I am not going crazy," Debi said out loud as she paced the entryway, looking out at the still-falling snow. "I am not going to become insane, I am not going to become insane."

"Yes, you are," said Milo, right with her now, so close behind her she expected to feel his breath on her neck. One of the Milos. Debi didn't bother turning to see where he was speaking from, not at first, because what was the point? Except then she knew she had to know.

She turned and Milo was standing right there, the goofy driver of the school bus, taking a moment to brush a lock of hair from his eyes and stare at her. He smiled and said, "Easy, sister."

Debi took a deep breath. "Milo."

"Yeah."

"Where is everybody else?"

"They're around."

Debi frowned; if Loudmouth Larry were around she would certainly have heard him whining about something. "Where?"

"Well . . . it's complicated."

"Say what?"

"You said it yourself. It's like being in an amusement park. So you got separated from your friends. They're off on their own rides right now. Find one to enjoy yourself before you meet later for lunch at the snack bar."

Said it herself? "I didn't say that; I was thinking it."

"What is your favorite ride at Disneyland?"

"The haunted house."

"Fun, isn't it?" Milo kept smiling his smile, as if nothing at all strange were going on, and that definitely unnerved her. "Hey, Debi. Want to know why your dreams all turn out to be nightmares?"

"No." Except she meant yes.

"Because you won't settle down. You need to settle."

"I don't want to settle down."

"Wouldn't you like to live a dream?"

What kind of a question was that? "No," said Debi, stepping back.

Which seemed to intrigue Milo. "Why not? The

only thing bad about a nice dream is you eventually have to wake up, right? On a snow day you never have to wake up."

Snow day, snow day, snow day . . .

"Not wake up?" said Debi. That was a stupid statement, and Debi was about to go at Mad Milo over it, except that in that instant she was gone again. . . .

This time she was in a small but bright room, a wooden cabin. Cabin fever? Cabin fever?

"No way," she said, standing up from the wooden bench on which she had found herself seated. On the far wall of the cabin logs crackled in the fireplace; a big, black kettle of soup simmered, and the warm smell of broth filled the place. Debi saw that she was wearing an old-fashioned long dress and leggings, but no shoes.

"Where am I?" Debi spoke out loud, walking to the cabin window. "Come on, you know you put me here. You could at least tell me where I'm supposed to be." She was talking to Milo, or whomever or whatever was responsible for all these dream trips.

Moving a curtain, she stared out the window. Snow covered the woods surrounding the cabin, and she saw a man in a heavy coat trudging toward the cabin door. He carried some animal

pelts and an old flintlock-type rifle. Before she could even react, he was entering the cabin.

"Ho, ho," he said. "It's wicked cold outside."

It was Milo.

"Why am I not surprised?" asked Debi.

"That's half the problem. What's going on back at the old house, I mean. You're hard to surprise, and I can't figure out what you know and what you don't know."

"What's going on?" Debi asked. "How are you doing this to me?"

"I'm not doing anything to you," he said, setting the rifle and pelts aside. "This is your doing. Or mostly yours. This is northern Michigan, about 1722, before America was even a nation. But still pretty country, isn't it?"

"I'm going crazy. That's it, isn't it?"

"Not exactly."

"Was Larry right? Are we out stuck in a snowbank, freezing to death?"

"No, no, and no," said Milo, wandering across the cabin to ladle himself a bowl of soup, which he started to eat with a flat wooden spoon. "Just another ride in the theme park, like I told you. Mmmmmm. Delicious as always, Debi."

She waited as he ate his soup.

"Great thing about all of this," he said, "is a

person can eat all he wants and never get fat. Ice cream every day."

"There's no ice cream in 1722."

"It doesn't have to be 1722. Want to ride in the space shuttle again?"

"No. I want to go home."

"Sorry. This park never closes."

"What's going on? Tell me!" With that Debi seized the flintlock rifle and aimed it at Milo. "Tell me or I'm going to shoot you."

"You wouldn't do that . . ."

Shaking, Debi raised the rifle and aimed. "Dare me."

"Debi, this is all up to you."

She fired.

She didn't hear the shot, not even the click. Maybe the hammer didn't even fall before she was back in the house, back in the entryway, looking out the window.

Alone.

Outside, the visibility wasn't even debatable; Debi doubted she was seeing more than a foot beyond the window glass. Behind the snow, above, was a distant glow—moonlight. Other than that there was nothingness.

It must be freezing out there. Debi shivered at the prospect. No jacket, no shoes, no socks, noth-

ing but rags to wrap her feet in if she got inventive and got some of those clothes from the upstairs closet and used them. Rags that were sure to get wet and become ice blocks before she even got to the road.

So she wouldn't make it, couldn't make it. No one could. Even if she managed to survive, which she did not believe, she'd wind up with her feet and fingers frostbitten and probably amputated.

Amputated: chopped off.

There's a thought—stay inside and figure out what was happening, or venture outside and get your feet chopped off.

Debi stopped because, beside the door, she found boots and a hat and a coat—her coat.

But only hers.

So what was she supposed to do? Leave? Escape?

You better believe it, Debi thought, scrambling into them. This was obviously the working of a demented mind—a powerful demented mind—but if the mind were in a nicer moment, no sense waiting around until he got mean all over again.

Except now Debi had to decide whether to leave or stay with her friends, who were apparently nowhere to be found. Were they all trying to get out of door-less bedrooms as well?

"Milo!" Debi screamed out his name, storming

through the sitting room and toward the kitchen again, banging on the walls and shouting. "Milo! What am I supposed to . . ."

Stepping into the kitchen, Debi lost her breath; she very nearly lost her balance. Because standing there inside the doorway was Milo, Mad Milo—except he wasn't alone, he was standing there beside someone else. At first Debi thought he was in front of a mirror because it was himself, another him.

Twins. And they were talking to each other, she could hear.

Talking about what to do with her. . . .

Which was another thing just about sufficient to send her off the deep end. Debi was again thinking of a poem. Normally it wouldn't have been a scary-type poem, but considering her situation, this teasing, this cat-and-mouse game going on, considering all of this, the poem seemed very scary indeed:

Apparently, merrily,
the rat ate the cheese.
Narrowly, warily,
it never said, "Please."
Cleverly, stealthfully,
the cat knew what to do.

Cunningly, politely,
it said, "Thank you."

Interesting, especially since Milo was the cat playing with her. Was Milo the Cat going to say, "Thank you"?

"Hello," Debi said, mustering up the courage. "So what are you now? Twin brothers?"

That idea seemed to please them. "Yeah . . ." said the Milo on the left. "Twins. That's it. I'm not Milo, I'm Mark. We're twins."

"Twins?" Wiping the sweat and grime from her face, her eyes, Debi stared very hard at Milo. No, not Milo. Mark. There was something different about him, just a shade different glint in his eyes; or maybe it was her imagination. "How can you be twins?"

"Uh . . . because of the insane lady?"

"Lady?" Even the second Milo seemed confused.

"The haunted house story," whispered the first Milo, except it wasn't much of a whisper.

"Oh, yeah," remembered the second Milo. "The old murdering grandmother. Who murdered my—uh, our—mother."

Debi frowned. "Somebody murdered your mother?"

Milo seemed to relish this; he was really get-

ting into the story. "Well, maybe no one would call it murder; she just caused her to die. It's the same thing, isn't it? Grandma Muhlzae was also the one who wouldn't let us be twins. She thought of us as one person—we could be only one person. When she was alive, she never let us both out of the house at the same time."

That made very little sense to Debi.

"That's unbelievable."

"No, not unbelievable. Just crazy, insane. Like this house. You want to know why this place was built this way? Because my grandfather was the secret hangman. Yeah, that's it. The hangman."

"Yeah, tell the hangman story."

"I will if you'll give me a minute."

"All right, all right. Anyway, Grandpa Muhlzae was the hangman, and he got paid five hundred dollars every time he hung someone, only it made my grandmother insane. She couldn't stand to keep the money, so she spent it. Always spent it. Even after my grandfather died, she kept spending all of her money on adding things to this house—tunnels, walls, stairs, closets, dungeons, trapdoors."

This was too perfect, Debi realized. It was perfect in a demented way, the same way the dream about the castle was perfect in its own way.

So Debi went ahead and called him the liar he was. . . .

16

Liar, liar, whose pants are afire.

Which wasn't exactly her response. "You guys must be kidding," she said. "You're doing the narration for a park ride. It's like the Haunted Mansion at Disneyland."

"What?"

"I'm not sure what's going on around here, but it's not a haunted house. This place is barely real. It's like it's all made of plastic."

" 'Plastic,' " repeated the second Milo. "I like that."

"It is real," said the first. "Like we said, it was designed by a madwoman."

"Maybe," said Debi. "But there's no madwoman zapping my brain and sending me to England or on a space shuttle. Or to 1722 Michigan. If you guys are doing this to me somehow, why don't you make up your minds?"

Both of the Milos shrugged. "It was worth a shot. You seemed almost confused enough to accept it."

"Almost."

One of the Milos smiled. "Come on, Debi, I'll say it again. Haven't you wondered why all your dreams turn into nightmares?"

"The dreams you force me into, you mean."

The Mad Milos shrugged. " 'Enforced dreams.' You can call them that. You need to settle down, Debi. You keep half waking up, half seeing what's going on, and your mind won't accept it. So you keep skipping out of your dreams."

"I don't need to be in a dream."

"But the problem is you keep upsetting the others."

What others? "Larry! Andrea? Anybody! Hey!" Debi pulled back, shook her head, and closed her eyes a moment.

"Easy," said the Milos.

"I accept one thing," said Debi. "This place *is* a madhouse."

"No," said Milo. "It used to be a madhouse. His-

torically, I mean. That story I told you about this house is true. Except now this place is more of a focal point. An aiming position, and a storage facility."

"Storage?"

It was an awkward moment, and Milo said, "You saw what was in the freezer."

Had she? "I can't remember."

"Okay," said one of the Milos. He was very nearly interrupted by a third Milo starting to come into the room, but the pair waved him out. This completely confirmed the unreality of the situation, which made what they were saying just a little more real to Debi, in a strange way. One of the Milos explained it. "You can't remember because I'm making it difficult to remember. Think again. I'll ease back off of your mind."

"What?" Not understanding, Debi said, "You're going to ease back off of my . . . oh, no!" There was a rush of coolness on Debi's thoughts, as if a headache were fading, or a breeze of fresh air on a hot, humid afternoon, and in that instant Debi felt it all pass, all the moments before Larry first opened the freezer, when he was making the serial killer joke, saying, "Ah-ha!" and then he popped open the bolt and pulled open the door, and—

And there they were. All six of them: Andrea,

The Fritch, Loudmouth Larry, Carl Lee, Cynthia, Thomas Tanner, and, yes, Debi Greer—she saw herself in there—every one of them strapped flat against the gray walls of the freezer. Their eyes were closed and they had tubes coming out of their arms.

No . . .

It was a horrible, terrible image, and Debi saw it very nearly as if in another of those weird dreams, except this was a heart-pounding nightmare. There she was, her face pale and frosty, her lips dark blue. All her skin was tinged, and the tubes running into her arm, they were . . . oh, no!

It was too much to take. She was in frozen storage, they were all in frozen storage, and Debi would have screamed except now the image was gone again and she was standing there with the three Milos now—as the third had returned and intruded himself despite the arguments of the other two.

"I think I need to sit down for a while," Debi said, and without waiting for an answer she sat down on the floor and wondered if she would ever be able to think straight again.

"Please, we need you to just calm down," the newest Milo was saying.

"We've been over that," said Milo number two. "Can't you remember that?"

"Remember it?" The newest Milo seemed insulted. "How do you know I've even done it yet?"

"Because I remember making an idiot out of myself and sticking my nose in the conversation before I knew what was going on the second time."

"This isn't anything new," said the first Milo, the one who was always the quietest. "I've seen it three times, and it's getting old, and it never works. She won't listen. How many times have we got that written down in the notes? 'The girl Debi will not cooperate.' "

"What?" said Debi.

"You won't listen," he said. "You never hear what we're trying to explain to you. How important it is."

"I don't know what's going on."

So the Milos explained it, but they did so in another one of those dreams, because in a twinkling Debi found herself in the future, or at least some vision that was supposed to be the future. Another hotel room? More space stuff?

Not exactly.

The room she stood in was not all gleaming metal, but enough of it was to be genuinely distracting. They were at least a hundred floors up

in some building, Debi could tell in a quick, woozy moment because directly in front of her were a set of sliding glass doors and a terrace, beyond and below which, leading to the horizon, was a great steel-and-glass city.

Milo was standing with her, just the one. Which, she couldn't tell; did it matter? He was dressed strangely, in a jumpsuit of several shades of several different colors. "My chameleon suit," he said, seeing that she noticed. "The colors change with my mood. It's all the fashion these days."

"These days?"

"These days of the future. See that city out there?" He led Debi to the terrace and said, "The city with no name."

"No name?"

"Because it's all one city. Almost all; the whole world is just one big city now. Pennsylvania is just a neighborhood in The City. The Empty City."

Debi said nothing. She was waiting for the point of all of this, and Milo did eventually start in on it. He explained, "We perfected time travel, in the year . . . oh, 2996, I think it was. Just a few years before yet another millennium."

"Yeah, right."

"Disbelieve if you want. That's why our conver-

sation is so muddled. Each of us Milos—the ones you were talking to—has been part of this discussion before, and two of us get to go through it one more time. It's all so pointless."

"It is?"

"I think it is. Sometimes it's hard to tell. Temporal travel does have a way of bringing out the futility in everything, though."

"Futility?"

"Pointlessness."

"So you're supposed to be a time traveler, Milo? Is that it?"

"That's it. Machines weren't enough to do it. That's the funny thing, that's why nobody ever invented time travel until the great minds of the time were up to it. Because the machine only helped you do what your mind fancies anyway. It's like the dreams."

"What about the dreams?"

"That's part of the problem with the dreams, because we can only help you do what your mind fancies doing anyway."

"Right," said Debi again. "You're from the future."

Milo shrugged. "I'm one of me. That's why you see my twins, why sometimes I seem confused to you, because this whole thing is—was—being done in several trips. There are different versions

of me walking around. I bump into myself in the hallway all the time. We—I—operate out of that house for the benefit of the future."

"You're supposed to be there for the future?"

"Absolutely," said Milo, gesturing out to the city. "Time travel works pretty well. Lucky thing, too, because nothing else is going for us in that particular world. Everyone is sick. Everything makes us sick, because our bodies are so weak. Strong minds, weak bodies. You know."

Doom was settling all around her, and with that the vision of the future was gone and she was back there with the three Milos, asking a very direct question. "So what are you going to do to me?"

None of the Milos answered directly, but one of them led her toward the kitchen, through the sitting room, and said, almost as a question, "Don't you love this house? We made it up special for you, the poet who fancies haunted houses. See, like I said, I've been here many times before. I know how all this works out, sort of. Eventually we do find a dream that pleases you, and allows us to get on with our work."

"What work? What kind of sick thing is going on here?"

"Well . . . you've heard of organ transplants."

"No!" Hearing that almost made Debi keel over.

"Nothing that bad," the second Milo stressed, jumping into the conversation. "Nothing that bad. See, we only need your blood. A little at a time."

"You're going to kill us."

"Never." Milo answered this very seriously. "We need you to live a good long time. Forever, if possible. Think about it. Live forever in a dreamworld of your choosing. Change dreams. A forever-time of pure pleasure."

"I don't believe you. This is horrible."

"No," said Milo, very grim then. He held Debi very firmly by the shoulders. "The future is horrible. I only began to show you what the problems there are. Disease is destroying us. The great city I showed you is nearly empty. A world full of emptiness because our bodies grew so weak our blood could not care for us. We need you children. You have to help us."

"No."

"Yes—I'm sorry. We need your blood."

17

With that the world changed again

to a sagebrush-covered, dry frontier. And a horse.

Debi was riding on horseback, a big, black horse that shook his head from time to time as she guided him across the range.

She saw that she had the full set of gear, too: a big saddle she sat in, rope, saddlebags, a bedroll, and a rifle. On her waist she wore a heavy gun belt and pistol and atop her head a cowboy hat.

"Okay," she said aloud. "So this is an Old West thing. And the punchline is . . .?"

There was no immediate punchline. She rode for a long while.

Incredibly, hours seemed to pass and she felt herself getting hot, sweaty, and thirsty on the ride. The horse beneath her had a steady, pacing gallop and was easy to ride. She held the leather reins in her hands and pulled back gently, slowing the horse to a stop. "Easy, boy," she said.

Debi looked around. "Milo!" she yelled. "Milo!"

He was nowhere to be seen; no one was. Just dirt and cactus and sagebrush and rock. The sky was blue, the sun was warm, and in the distance there were mountains. So she rode on.

After a while of riding, though, she did see someone on the horizon, sitting horseback near a group of bushes and a creek bed. It didn't take Debi long to guess who it might be, so she rode over. It took about half an hour to get within shouting distance, and she called, "Yo, Milo. This is real interesting, but . . ."

It wasn't Milo this time. When the rider turned, she saw it was Carl Lee, and he had a big grin on his face as he recognized her. "Debi! Come on over!"

She did, edging her horse closer to his. "Carl?"

Carl Lee was definitely into the spirit of this whole thing. "Isn't this the most incredible thing you've ever done in your life?"

Debi saw no spirit of a thing to get into. "No," she said.

"Why not?" he asked, having barely seemed to have heard her. He pulled on the reins of his pony and led it to the edge of the creek; the horse began to drink, and Carl adopted a casual lean back, both hands on the saddle horn. "I always loved western movies. I always wanted to be a cowboy. But that was crazy. How was I ever going to be a cowboy?"

Debi had to admit one thing: Carl Lee definitely seemed excited. He was talking more in this dream than he had ever done in real life. "But this isn't real," she told him.

"It's real enough. It feels real to me. What's reality, anyway? I think I'll call myself Cowboy Carl."

"What about your mom and dad? Your brothers?"

That seemed to bother Carl a bit, but then he said, "What's the big deal if we play a little bit, Debi? It's not like we're going to be here forever. You got here. And you got out before."

That was true, Debi realized, but she still wasn't sure whether she was the one escaping these enforced dreams or whether she was being allowed to leave them for some other reason. "I barely got out," she said. "Besides, don't you even

wonder how this works? How you got into this dream? And why?"

"Sure, but . . ."

"I know why."

"You do?"

"Yes," said Debi. "I know what the bad truth behind all of this is, and . . ."

"Hold it, lady."

Now Milo was there, Milo the Desperado with his gang, three rough-looking riders on horseback. Debi could tell it was Milo even though he had a bright-red bandanna pulled up over his face. "You oughtn't to talk so much."

"Why not? You told me."

"You still don't get it, do you? We only told you what you already knew."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah," said Milo the Desperado. "You don't think we're letting you in on any secrets we don't have to, do you? Wait! No!"

Milo was shouting because Carl Lee really was in the spirit of this dream, or maybe it was something he saw one of Milo's bad-guy companions about to do, because Carl jerked his pistol from the holster and aimed to fire at them, except Milo's bad guys were a lot faster. And why not? thought Debi in the blur of motion. It was their dream, after all.

Blam! Blam-blam!

A gunfight!

Without even realizing what she was doing, Debi threw herself off of her horse and slammed into the ground, hurting her arm and making her braces ache as she did, but at least she wasn't shot—not even pretend-dream shot, or whatever would happen if she got caught in the cross fire.

Which was the question of questions, she realized, as she crawled toward the rock behind which Carl Lee was hiding. If you got killed in this dream, would you die for real?

Good question. Fortunately, Carl Lee was shot only in the shoulder; he wasn't dead. "Man," he said, choking a bit as he fumbled with his gun. "That really hurts."

"You're shot."

"Yeah, but . . . ow!"

The bad guys were advancing. Very upset now, Carl Lee said, "Milo's over there shouting for the bad guys to hold their fire, stay where they are, but they aren't listening. They're still trying to shoot us."

"Why?" asked Debi, actually pulling out her own pistol and wondering if she should shoot. "If this dream is Milo's doing, he should certainly be able to control his own bad guys, shouldn't he?"

"I don't know."

Debi did shoot: *Bam! Bam!* She had no choice; the two henchmen were creeping closer, using the rocks and bushes as cover, and the horses had long since run away. No escape. Then something occurred to Debi. "Wait a minute. The Milos told me the dream was mostly my doing. They could only work with what I fancied in the first place."

"But this is my dream," said Carl Lee, choking again.

"Is it?" wondered Debi, standing up and exposing herself to the bad guys' guns.

"Get down!" yelled Carl Lee, but it was too late. An explosion of gunfire erupted and—

Debi was back in the house. Back in the bedroom again, lying on the bed, except this time she had company in the room. The three Milos stood in the open doorway, like the three monkeys on the statue: See No Evil, Hear No Evil, Speak No Evil. "You just don't understand, do you?" one of them said.

"No," said Debi. "I guess not."

"You are the problem," they said. "Debi Greer is the problem. Every time you go into a dream—yours or anyone else's—you disrupt and ruin it. All of your dreams become nightmares. And the reason they become nightmares is because you won't settle down. Your mind will not accept

what is happening. You're still half awake, and we keep having these pointless discussions."

"So let me go."

"Let you go?" The Milos looked at each other. "It's far, far, too late to let you go. Don't you know how long we've been having this argument? It's too late to stop now. Shall we show you?"

"Show me what?"

"Go to the mirror."

"What?" Debi noticed that the room had changed some, only in that there was now a large, oval mirror hanging on one of the walls. She got off of the bed and walked to it. What she saw in the mirror made her blood run cold.

The reflection was hers all right. There she was, Debi Greer, and if she was a day, she was at least thirty years old. . . .

18

Life had passed her by.

"But only because you let it," said one of the Milos. "We've been offering you opportunity after opportunity to fashion your own destiny, dream you own destiny, dream your own life, live your own dreams. But, no . . ."

"You've spent your days and years rebelling," said the second Milo.

"Why fight?" asked the third.

"I'm old!" screamed Debi, feeling her face. The braces were gone from her teeth; her hair was long. The freckles had long since faded. She was taller, more developed. "How old am I?"

"Thirty-two. We tried to help you."

"I'm only thirteen."

"You were thirteen. Now you're thirty-two."

"That's . . ." Debi tried to do the math, but she remembered she hated math. Now she knew why, and she felt woozy saying it. "Nineteen years. You guys took nineteen years from me."

"But we can give them back," reminded one of the Milos.

"Oh, yes," agreed another. "We are masters of time and destiny. We offer you a hundred years. A thousand, even, and all healthy. All young. But you must settle down and stop fighting us on this."

"You guys are vampires. I want to go home."

"You'll never go home, Debi. That's what we're—I'm—trying to tell you. We just keep replaying these same scenes, these same interrupted dreams for all your life. I've been to visit you here in this house when you're eighty years old. Do you realize that? And at the end of your life you've had eighty miserable years of nightmares, of dreams going bad, because you won't just kick back and enjoy what has to be."

"No," said Debi. "That's not possible."

"It is possible," he said. "Now listen, because we're only going to give you one hundred thousand last chances. . . ."

That was too much to handle: Debi dropped.

* * *

Beeeeeeeeeppppppp!!!!!

It was the ultimate noise, a shrill ringing, and Debi flashed to reality with an icy film splitting on her face. She was in the freezer, being disconnected from the contraption by an old man. "Who . . . what . . ."

"Easy, girl," said the old man, pulling out plugs and magically sealing the small cuts in her skin, healing and warming her. "We've got to get you and your friends out of here." He had a low, raspy voice, and there was something familiar about him, something she soon recognized. "Milo!"

"Yes," he smiled wearily.

"You're the same Milo?"

He shrugged. "I've aged better than some."

"You were young before."

"Different versions of myself," he explained. "We've kept you here, trying every manner of fantasy, of dream, on you. I've wasted years trying to keep after you over what started that one winter's day."

"The snow day," Debi said. Then she asked, "How old am I?" Milo was old, so did that mean she was old too? No . . .

His weary smile held. "You're young again. One of the paradoxes of time juxtaposition. I've been popping in and out on you. Funny thing

about time travel. You can fit decades into just a few of the same moments. And we never calmed you. We never will. We're giving up."

More than a little bit nervous, Debi asked, "You're going to let me go?"

"We'll let you all go," said the old man Milo had become. "We're not murderers or killers. We're just the future, and we wanted help—wanted to help you as well—but your will is too strong to allow yourself to be used like this. So be it."

"So be it?"

"Besides," confessed old Mad Milo. "The reason the future has gone bad is partially because of the way the past went. One alternate past we never tried was to release you all, give you a real chance at changing the world as you grew up. Maybe that would help the future. Probably not, but perhaps. After all, the future can only be fixed in the present—every present—and who knows what role a young poet might play?"

He smiled again.

"As for letting you and your friends go, there are just two conditions."

Debi waited.

"Tell them nothing. Let them think all of this was the later portion of their dreams. Take them away from here and never, ever return."

"Why?"

"Because I'm not the only one of me. Remember, the younger Milos are still driving your school bus, still looking for an opportunity. Still waiting for another snow day, when this time things will work out for the future."

"Okay."

The oldest Mad Milo smiled then. "Your friends are all in their own individual dreams now. Would you like to go get them yourself?"

Even Debi had to smile at that. "Sure."

So she did. . . .

19

The ride escaping the Muhlzae Maze Manor

wasn't going to be difficult, Debi was told, but there were certain motions through which she had to go for the sake of appearances.

So, with old Mad Milo's help, things were reversed to a degree. In a lot of ways it was very much like an amusement-park ride, because to the others things seemed to be happening in real time; to Debi it was all rushed, like running a video on fast-forward. First she snatched each of them from the private dreams that were being enforced on them. As they were all released from the freezer, the maze house allowed Debi to meet

up with Larry, Carl, Tommy, Cyndi, and The Fritch, and they were all excited, exclaiming that now there was no front door. No escape.

Shifting her candle from hand to hand, Debi felt herself shiver. From the cold, or from what? The role she had to play in the ending of all this? "We can get out now. So we should get out of here."

They walked and looked and played through the desperation. "Out of here, where?" Loudmouth Larry was his old self again. "How can we leave? It's freezing outside, we don't have shoes. We can't just trudge out there in the snow—we won't make it. People must be looking for us."

Then they found their shoes. And their coats. And as the terrified bunch scrambled to get back into their things, even Milo was with them, confused, but this was another version of Mad Milo the bus driver. He just let them collect themselves and trudge back outside through a door that suddenly appeared.

And, the weather was better. Debi figured this time-traveling bunch of Milos had all the time in the world with which to fool around. They'd just wait for another snow day.

An interesting thing happened when they were actually leaving the house, though; Larry seemed to go through a complete personality change. He

whispered privately to her, and Debi was so surprised at his whispering, at what he was whispering, that she almost choked. Larry whispered, "I like poems too, Debi. I was just teasing you before. 'Lightning zapped my best friend Fred, fried the hat upon his head. Spent ten days afraid in bed, thanking God he wasn't dead.' "

"I know the feeling. . . ." said Debi.

That was all the haunted-house story, the different versions of the escape from the Muhlzae Maze Manor through which they had to go. But they did get out; they were rescued before they froze to death. No one was killed or injured or even grotesquely broken in spirit.

They went back to their homes and families, and in a way they were celebrities of sorts because the school bus had been found, with no trace of their wanderings in the snow, and many people had feared the entire group frozen to death somewhere.

Throughout it all, Debi stared occasionally at Milo, the young Milo, but he said nothing. Maybe even he wasn't aware of anything, Debi realized. After all, it was the oldest of the Mad Milos who saved them. This young Milo had never even managed to trap them, as was the plan. Maybe

another of the older Milos had told him the whole thing was called off.

Who knew?

As it was, life went on. Christmas break was fun and school eventually restarted. Debi didn't do particularly well on her math test, but she did manage to pass, much to her own surprise, so her father had no cause to get angry.

Funny thing: Although she never, ever let slip from her mind all the dream stuff and the crazed goings-on at the Maze Manor, which she finally decided were hypothermia-induced dreams, the really significant question never occurred to her for months; when it did she was sitting in algebra class, much as she had been when the first of the dreams kicked in. And like most really horrific, scary thoughts, this one just sort of eased into her mind as she saw Ms. Peters stick her head in the door and have a quick chat with Mrs. Fitzgerald. Debi remembered her old cat-in-the-cradle dream, the one about the sky falling and all that, and one thing led to another as for the zillionth time she thought about the snow and the cold, the Maze Manor and the freezer nightmare, and then she wondered what if . . .

What if the oldest of the Milos was just another dream?

What if she and the others had never actually

ever gotten out of that house on that snow day? What if they were all still there, plugged in and trapped in that icy freezer? What if Debi wasn't back in her life for real, but was still lying there with her eyes closed, her lips and fingers blue from the freezing process, tubes stuck into her at every available spot.

What . . . what if the illusion Debi had settled on was her freedom?

Did *Snow Day* make you nervous about going to school? Well, imagine if your principal turned out to be the scariest person in the building! Check out the following terrifying selection from *Don't Go to the Principal's Office,* the new Avon Camelot Spinetingler coming in March 1996, if you dare. . .

I couldn't believe I had overslept on the first day of school. Now I was having to run the six blocks from my house to Crosswell Elementary. What made it even worse was that it was pouring rain.

I had already decided to use the back door, just in case I was late, so our principal, Mr. Franklin, wouldn't see me.

Just as I rounded the corner of the building, though, I stopped suddenly. Through the rain I could see the back of a tall, skinny man. He was standing at the door, looking through one of the small windows.

What's he doing there? I wondered.

Then the man turned around, and I screamed.

He had a face like a horror-movie monster! Oh, my gosh! I thought. He's one of those creeps you

hear about on television, and he's trying to get into our school! I had to warn everybody.

I ran around to the front of the school, just as a bell rang. Was that the first one or the second one? I wondered.

When I got inside, there were still a lot of people in the main hall, so I wasn't tardy after all. I still had time to do something about the creepy-looking man who was trying to get into our school without getting into trouble myself.

I thought about just going straight to Mr. Franklin's office to tell him what was happening, but I decided to find Ms. Maitlin's sixth-grade class first. She was going to be my teacher this year. I knew my best friend, Ted Lawrence, had been assigned to her, too, so I could tell him what I had just seen and then together we could go see Mr. Franklin. Mr. Franklin had always liked Ted, so if Ted told him that we should call the police to have the man arrested, then I was sure he'd do it.

When I rounded a corner of the main hallway, I saw Ted waiting for me outside Ms. Maitlin's class.

I waved.

Ted motioned for me to hurry up.

When I finally got there, I was so out of breath, I couldn't tell him about the creepy-looking man

who was trying to get into the school building before he said, "Guess what, Richard? Mr. Franklin isn't the principal anymore. We're getting a new one. I just heard it from Rebecca Abshire."

Now I was so surprised that, for the moment, I forgot all about the creepy-looking man. "What happened to Mr. Franklin?"

"Who knows? After last year they probably had to commit him."

I shuddered just remembering all the problems Mr. Franklin had had last year with some of the students at Crosswell Elementary School. "Do you know who the new principal is?"

"All I know is Rebecca said he's a creepy-looking man."

"A creepy-looking man?" Oh, no! I thought. It couldn't be! It just couldn't be! "Why can't we have a woman principal like they have at Rambeau?" I demanded.

Ted just looked at me. "Why would you want a woman principal?"

"Rambeau's a great school, that's why. Mrs. Formelow lets the kids do all kinds of neat things. We don't do anything at Crosswell. I just wish I went to Rambeau."

"Well, you don't."

Just then the final bell rang, and I started to follow Ted into our classroom, but down at the

end of the hall, I saw the man who'd been outside the back door. "Ted. Look!" I whispered. "Do you think *he's* the new principal?"

Ted stopped and looked. "He's certainly creepy-looking enough."

"He was standing in the rain looking through a window in the back door when I got to school. It was like he was spying on us or something."

"That would fit," Ted said.

The man was walking toward us. He wasn't smiling. I felt Ted pulling on my arm.

"Come on. We're going to be late for class."

But for some reason, I couldn't move. This man had huge eyes, and he was staring straight at me. It was as if I were hypnotized or something. It was crazy.

Ted kept pulling on my sleeve, trying to get me to go into the classroom, but I couldn't take my eyes off this man. "Ms. Maitlin has already started class, Richard," he hissed. "Come on!"

"What are you two boys doing out in the hall?" the man said. "Why aren't you in your classroom?"

"We're trying to go in, sir! We really are!" Ted said frantically. He pulled on my sleeve even harder. "Come on, Richard!"

The man continued to stare at me, and I continued to stare at him.

"What's your name?" he asked.

The first thing I thought was to give him a phony name, but something wouldn't let me do it. "Richard Williams," I said.

"Well, Richard Williams, I'm Mr. Amsted. I'm the new principal of Crosswell Elementary School, and I expect you to do what I tell you to!"

"Yes, sir," I said mechanically.

I turned and followed Ted into the classroom.

Ms. Maitlin stopped talking and just looked at us. So did the rest of the class. I had the strangest feeling that something really weird had just happened to me.

The only seats in the entire room that weren't taken were in the front row. There were three of them.

"See what you did, Richard!" Ted said. "Now we can't trade baseball cards during class."

"I'm sorry," I said. I shook my head. What was wrong with me? I had never felt like this before. I tried to remember what had just happened.

I was standing out in the hallway with Ted, and then I saw this tall, skinny man walking toward us, and he reminded me of a horror-movie monster, and then all of a sudden my head felt funny, and it was as if I didn't have any control over what I was thinking.

"Richard?"

Ted poked me.

I turned to see what he wanted.

He was nodding toward the front of the room.

Ms. Maitlin was looking at me. "Is there anything wrong, Richard?"

"No, ma'am. I don't guess so. I don't know."

"Well, I would appreciate it if you and Ted would just sit down, then. You're blocking the view for the rest of the class."

"Oh, yes, ma'am," I said.

The rest of the class had started snickering, but someone at the back of the room was laughing hard.

I turned to see who it was, and my heart almost stopped. Sammie Shell was in our room this year. "I thought he moved!"

"What?" Ted said.

I turned back to Ted. "Sammie Shell's in here," I whispered.

"I thought he moved."

"Well, if he did, he has a twin."

Sammie Shell was the biggest bully at Crosswell, a school that has its share of kids who don't even try to get along with other kids.

This was turning out to be a really awful first day of school. To start off, I had acted like an idiot in front of the new principal, and he now knew my name. I had been late for class, so I

had to sit in the front row. Now I had discovered that Sammie Shell was in our room. What I wanted to do was just go home and start all over again.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Sammie raise his hand.

I looked at Ms. Maitlin and noticed that she swallowed hard a couple of times before she said, "What do you want, Sammie?"

"I want to sit in the front row."

Ms. Maitlin blinked. "Why?" I'm sure she was as puzzled as the rest of us.

"I think I can hear better."

Ms. Maitlin looked at me. There was an empty seat on my right. "Well, I guess you may sit by Richard."

I scrunched my eyes shut. How could this get any worse? I had just found out.

I could hear the scraping of Sammie's chair as he hurried to get out of it. All kinds of horrible thoughts started going through my mind. There was no way I was going to survive this school year.

Now I could hear Sammie clumping up the center aisle. He always wore heavy boots. He loved to step on your feet.

Then I heard a loud scream.

The whole class whirled around.

"What happened?" Ms. Maitlin demanded.

"Sammie pulled my hair," Kathryn Jonas said.

Ms. Maitlin took a deep breath. "Is that true, Samuel?"

Sammie opened his mouth.

But before he could say anything, Mr. Amsted appeared at the door. "What's the trouble, Ms. Maitlin? I heard someone scream."

Ms. Maitlin looked at the principal, then at Sammie. "Would you care to tell Mr. Amsted what happened?"

But Sammie just looked at Mr. Amsted, and Mr. Amsted just looked at Sammie. Not a word was spoken between them.

Then the funniest thing happened. Mr. Amsted turned, and Sammie stood up and started following him.

Ms. Maitlin watched him leave. She didn't say anything, but I could tell she was thrilled to have Sammie Shell out of the classroom.

So was I.

Outside it continued to thunder. Lightning lit up the sky.

Then the electricity went off.

It was eerie.

We just sat there for a few minutes, looking at each other, wondering what was going to happen, waiting for the electricity to come back on, but

after about fifteen minutes, when it hadn't, Ms. Maitlin said, "Well, I guess you can just sit and visit quietly."

"It's thundering and lightning, and we have a new principal who looks like a horror-movie monster," Ted said.

I shivered. Ted was right. We had sort of been kidding about it, but now I wasn't so sure it was a joke. "I wonder if . . ."

Suddenly, lightning flashed and thunder shook the classroom as the door opened, revealing Mr. Amsted.

Ms. Maitlin gasped.

Several of the kids in the class screamed.

I grabbed my desk.

"Mr. Shell is ready to return to your class, Ms. Maitlin," Mr. Amsted said. He said it like a monster, too, using a slow, deep voice.

Thunder shook the room again.

Then lightning struck something right outside our classroom, because there was a big flash and a huge booming sound.

Several more people screamed.

"Man, this is too much," I whispered to Ted. "Something strange is happening in this school."

"You're telling me," Ted whispered back.

Then Mr. Amsted stepped aside, and Sammie Shell appeared in the doorway.

He was looking straight ahead. I thought he'd be smiling or frowning or something, but there was absolutely no expression on his face.

Slowly, he began to walk into the room.

When he was all the way inside, he stopped and stood facing us. "Ms. Maitlin, I want to apologize to you for my inexcusable behavior. I also want to apologize to Kathryn Jonas for pulling her hair. I want to apologize to the rest of my fellow students, too, for any problems I have caused them this morning and during all the years I have been at Crosswell Elementary School. I promise that I shall be a model student for the rest of my academic career."

Then Sammie started walking toward the seat next to me. When he got to it, he sat down slowly.

He folded his hands on his desk and continued to look straight ahead.

Out in the hallway, I thought I saw a slight smile on Mr. Amsted's face before he disappeared from view.

Then something else incredible happened.

The rain slowed and then stopped, and the sun came out.

The electricity also came back on.

I started breathing again. I had been holding my breath for the last few minutes, it seemed.

I wasn't exactly sure what had happened to

Sammie Shell, but it had to have been something monumental, and it made me really nervous just thinking about what it could have been.

Ms. Maitlin went back to telling us what we were going to be doing this year, but I was having a hard time concentrating.

All I could think of was that, no matter what else happened this year, there was absolutely no way I was *ever* going to get sent to the principal's office!

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